
Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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HISTORY OF THE AWA

MARCH 2, 2009

A tragic situation took place in recent weeks involving wrestling legend Verne Gagne and the death of Helmut Gutmann, who resided in the same Alzheimer's and dementia facility in Bloomington, MN. On 1/26, Gagne, who turns 83 on 2/26, threw Gutmann, a frail 97-year-old, down to the ground hard in the public lobby of the Friendship Village memory loss unit, breaking his right hip, and also injuring his head. Gutmann was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, underwent hip surgery, which he came through fine, and was released four days later. He was receiving physical therapy, but then, perhaps because of the pain he was in from the injury that he didn't understand, since he had no memory of what happened to him, refused to eat or drink. His condition rapidly worsened, and he was sent to hospice care, and passed away on 2/14.

Gutmann's wife, Betty, who had been married to him for 63 years, and also lives at Friendship Village, said she was told immediately about the attack and rushed over, finding her husband lying on the floor and in tremendous pain. She was upset about it, but she also realizes that in the condition he was in, Gagne probably didn't know what he was doing, and it appeared neither man had any recollection of the incident.

"You can't blame the person that did it," she said. "(He) doesn't know what he's doing. I feel so sorry for his family, because they are faced with a terrible problem of what to do."

Gagne was kicked out of Friendship Village after the incident.

Police weren't called, but were made aware of an incident involving two senior citizens at the facility. A story on MinnPost.com interviewed several people at Friendship Village that noted Gagne had a history of violent outbursts while staying at the facility. He had been kicked out after an earlier incident, but was later allowed to return. Bloomington police are investigating the death, but it is unlikely, due to his mental condition, that Gagne would be held responsible for a crime. Deputy Chief Perry Heles of the Bloomington police said they were trying to determine whether to recommend charges be pressed against Gagne.

"No one knows," what happened, said Ruth Hennig (no relation to the Hennig wrestling family), the daughter of Gutmann, in an interview with the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. "I don't think anyone was present when it began...or even if anything precipitated it."

At first, Guttmann's death was ruled accidental, but Mike Opitz of the medical examiner's office said the cause of death hasn't been officially certified.

Gagne and Gutmann had also had a prior incident, when Guttmann created a disturbance by shouting at people in a lounge. Gagne lost his temper because Guttmann wouldn't quiet down after he yelled at him to stop, and, likely due to natural instinct, put him in a sleeper hold. Betty Guttmann said her husband was frightened, but not injured.

Guttmann, a Jewish scientist, fled Nazi Germany during the reign of Adolf Hitler, and worked as a cancer research scientist in Minneapolis from 1952 to 1992, published 120 papers on the subject and also taught at the University of Minnesota. He was also a classical musician with the Bloomington Symphony. A violinist for most of his life, he switched to the piano at a very old age when he could no longer hold a violin. At 97, even though suffering from advanced stages of dementia, he was still able to perform on the piano, and was scheduled to do so at a church classical concert at the beginning of this month, before being unable due to the injuries suffered that required surgery when he was thrown on the ground.

The story also quoted a woman who answered the phone at Gagne's home, only identified as one of Gagne's daughters (he had two daughters, Kathy and Donna, the latter of whom in the 80s and 90s was married to Larry Zbyszko), who refused to talk about the incident, and was upset at the reporter for writing about it, saying it was a personal family matter and that nobody has confirmed that the fall was the reason for the death. Greg Gagne told the St. Paul Pioneer Press only that it was a terrible accident, but said any other questions would have to be answered by family attorney Julian Hooks, who didn't return any media calls.

"He has only one minute of memory retention and even though nobody is saying that this is the reason the that this man died, you're going to publish this? Unbelievable," said the woman who identified herself as Gagne's daughter. "You take a man who has given nothing but his time and energy to this state, he loses his mind, and you're going to do this?"

Gagne, real name LaVerne Gagne, was one of the biggest stars in pro wrestling history. In the last issue of the 20th century in Sports Illustrated, Gagne was listed as No. 24 among the 50 greatest athletes in the history of the state of Minnesota. He was a two-time NCAA champion as well as a college football star at the University of Minnesota. Gagne was drafted in the 16th round of the 1947 NFL draft by the Chicago Bears, since, because he enlisted in the Marine Corps during World War II, he was eligible for the NFL draft when his college class graduated even though he had several more years of athletic eligibility left. He continued on the football team until 1948 and the wrestling team until 1949. After beating Dick Hutton via referee's decision after double overtime in 1949 to win the NCAA heavyweight tournament in Fort Collins, CO, in one of the most famous college wrestling matches of all-time, ending Hutton's nearly three-season winning streak (it was Hutton's only loss in four seasons of college wrestling, going four years unbeaten in college is a mark Cael Sanderson is the only man in history to reach although most likely Danny Hodge and Yujiro Uetake would have if freshman were eligible in their heydays), he played in the 1949 College football All-Star game. But he turned down an NFL offer and went into pro wrestling at the end of the year.

During his first year as a pro wrestler, he won a tournament to become the NWA world junior heavyweight champion (the title vacated when Leroy McGuirk went blind), winning rookie of the year honors and was an instant national star. His being portrayed as the good-looking All-American babyface on Fred Kohler's Chicago wrestling show, carried nationally on the Dumont network, made him one of the biggest draws and highest paid athletes in the country during the early 50s wrestling boom.

When Kohler made Gagne his United States heavyweight champion in 1953, partially a political move because the NWA had booked a Lou Thesz appearance for a rival promotion and Kohler stopped using Thesz as his top star, Gagne was booked around the country and would get 10% of the gate. This made Gagne a political rival to Thesz, with the feeling that Gagne touring as U.S. champion booked by Jim Barnett in Kohler's office, and having stronger regular television pushing him in much of the country was cutting into the NWA world championship business, plus undercutting since the NWA champion in those years would get 15% of the gate, due to not just Thesz's cut but title matches also meant a percentage went to both Strangler Lewis as Thesz's manager and Sam Muchnick as Thesz's booker.

After wrestling lost its network outlet when the Dumont Network folded, and business was down in most of the country, Gagne purchased controlling interest in the Minneapolis Boxing & Wrestling Club. Gagne was upset by the late 50s that he was bypassed twice when it came to the decision regarding the NWA world heavyweight championship. The first time came when Thesz dropped the title to Hutton. The second

came when Hutton lost to Pat O'Connor in 1959. The NWA board had approved of Gagne, and suggested him (as well as Buddy Rogers) to Thesz as a possible successor when Thesz decided to give up the championship for good in 1957 and book his own schedule due to the feeling he could tour the world on a working vacation, be free from the arduous NWA schedule and bill himself as International heavyweight champion, and the fans in foreign countries would figure it was Lou Thesz as world champion.

Thesz was gung-ho on Hutton as his replacement. He believed Hutton to be the best real wrestler in the industry at the time, since Thesz's other pick, George Gordienko, couldn't get into the United States because of McCarthyism since Gordienko was at one point in his life a communist. Thesz often remarked he believed Hutton was the best heavyweight wrestler he had ever seen. Still, later in life, Gagne and Thesz put their past differences aside and Thesz always praised Gagne's actual wrestling ability as being among the best he had ever worked with.

Gagne was a far bigger and more marketable pro star than the quiet Hutton. While many would argue O'Connor was a superior performer and worker than Gagne, Gagne was a far bigger national name, a better promo and a more established drawing card than the New Zealander. He also had the better "real sports" qualifications and legitimate ability that most of the promoters liked the NWA champion to have. O'Connor's strength was that he was far more unselfish in the ring, as Gagne always had a reputation among the wrestlers for always wanting to look good in the match, sometimes at the expense of the match.

Gagne pulled his local promotion out of the NWA, and created the American Wrestling Association world heavyweight championship. The cover story given on television in Minneapolis was that Gagne had been No. 1 contender for the title for years, but had not received a championship shot, and if O'Connor (incorrectly portrayed as Thesz in the WWE AWA History DVD) didn't give him a title shot in 90 days, then O'Connor would be stripped of the championship. Of course Gagne never asked for any dates on O'Connor to come in, and had pulled the Minneapolis office out of the NWA to create his own organization where he would control the championship.

Gagne was then billed as world champion in Minnesota when the 90 day period expired. He held the AWA championship for much of the period from 1960, until his first retirement in 1981, retiring as champion. During that period, the AWA grew from just the Minnesota area, to throughout the Midwest, and at its peak included successfully running regularly in Chicago, Denver, Winnipeg, Milwaukee and Green Bay, and later to San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and Albuquerque, and all Midwest points in between. In the 70s, the AWA territory even included monthly shows in Honolulu, where, not surprisingly, Gagne defended his title far more frequently than most of the other cities in the circuit, as due to running the company, he would usually only work a few dates per month, making title matches special and raising ticket prices when he would appear.

Many wrestlers in the 70s in particular said the AWA was the greatest territory to work because Gagne kept the schedule to usually around 15 days per month, giving the wrestlers more time with their families than most promotions that ran their guys to death. It didn't have the lifestyle of working in Florida, Los Angeles or Hawaii, but the money was far better. It was usually one of the healthiest and best paying promotions.

For most of the period from 1960 until the territorial system disintegrated in the late 80s, Gagne was on good terms with the NWA, and regularly attended the conventions even though he wasn't a member. Although it was never known publicly, Gagne even owned a percentage of certain NWA promotions at different times, including a minority stake in McGuirk's Tulsa office and later, a minority stake in St. Louis after Sam Muchnick retired and sold his stock. Gagne at times defended his title on NWA shows, and on occasion would come to Madison Square Garden billed as AWA champion. But he also in 1969 attempted to expand, unsuccessfully, into Los Angeles, creating a major wrestling war, which was short-lived as his group, running the Forum in Inglewood, couldn't compete with the established local

promotion even though they loaded shows up with major international superstars. In late 1980, he moved into San Francisco, which led to Roy Shire quitting as a promoter in the market. Once Vince McMahon expanded into his territory in 1984 after raiding much of his roster both in front and behind-the-scenes, Gagne and Chicago White Sox owner Eddie Einhorn spearheaded Pro Wrestling USA, a failed attempt to compete with McMahon in the New York City market.

The AWA concentrated on using the same talent forever, with a primitive television show, held in a tiny studio in Minneapolis before about 80 fans, but featuring some of the best interview talent around. Gagne himself was the consummate friendly next-door-neighbor babyface promo guy, and he surrounded himself with wild characters like The Crusher, Mad Dog Vachon, Superstar Billy Graham, Dr. X (Dick Beyer), Wahoo McDaniel, Bobby Heenan, Jesse Ventura, Nick Bockwinkel (who became his best-known rival for the last decade of his full-time career), Ray Stevens, Ivan Putski, Ivan Koloff, Blackjack Lanza, Dusty Rhodes, Dick Murdoch, Larry Hennig, Baron Von Raschke and many others during the company's heyday. The regulars earned \$45,000 to \$75,000 per year, and the biggest draws like Crusher, Bockwinkel, Graham and others earned more than that. Most of the regulars earned equivalent to what main event stars in most of the territories would earn, but work a far less taxing schedule, particularly in the summer when Gagne scaled down operations because that part of the country's business significantly fell off historically in that time of year. Plus, Gagne's big draw, Crusher, would have his usual perfectly timed pre-summer blow-up with Gagne over money, and quit.

The negative was the cold winters which scared a lot of the talent out of the area. Graham, one of the territory's all-time hottest heel stars, hated the weather so badly that he moved to Dallas and would fly in for all the shows. Gagne remained successful through the mid-80s, even though his television show was horrible as compared with most of the other promotions, even when his territory was still thriving.

But wrestling was a local institution in most of his cities because he employed a popular but aging group of local heroes and villains. But the television competition from the stronger World Wrestling Federation and Jim Crockett Promotions led to Gagne's company starting a rapid demise, and it was out of business a few years later.

Gagne made millions as a promoter, lived on a beautiful house on the lake, and was a major supporter of local amateur wrestling and other charities and kept a squeaky clean public image, even though he was not well liked within the Minnesota wrestling scene and loved being the center of attention in public. But the AWA filed for bankruptcy in 1991, and closed down at that point. Eric Bischoff, who worked for Gagne at the end, noted going long periods of time without a paycheck. Bischoff blamed the local government using eminent domain to take some of his land and pay him far less than its market value for Gagne's financial problems. But the death of the AWA was because he couldn't compete with Crockett and McMahon on a national basis and his promotion stopped drawing. His personal bankruptcy was due to other real estate investments going bad after the wrestling promotion folded.

He produced a movie, the original movie called "The Wrestler," starring himself, Edward Asner and Billy Robinson in a movie somewhat based on the real life AWA wrestling scene in the early 70s heyday. The movie, which portrayed pro wrestling as a real sport shunned by a prejudiced media, was built around the idea that Mike Bullard, the character played by Gagne and based almost completely on Gagne (in the movie, Bullard went to the University of Minnesota and was a two-time NCAA champion, but also an Olympic gold medalist, but in reality, that one eluded him because the legendary Henry Wittenberg, who ended up winning the gold medal, beat him for the Olympic team birth in 1948), was an aging pro wrestler who was still the world champion because nobody could beat him. One of the storylines was the main promoters (ironically the most vocal of the group was played by Vince McMahon Sr.) wanted him out of the championship picture because they felt he was too old to be marketable before they would agree to a series of unification matches to create a real world champion that would include NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. and WWWF champion Pedro Morales. Robinson played Billy Taylor, an international superstar and the best technical wrestler in the world, but who was an

unknown on U.S. shores, with the idea that Asner, playing Gagne as promoter, finally found the wrestler who could beat Bullard, win the title, and the wrestling Super Bowl could take place. This was pretty much the wrestling scene in North America in early 1972, and also included training camp footage of Gagne's camp where you could see a young Ric Flair, Ken Patera and Jim Brunzell in scenes, as well as a wrestling session with Dan Gable vs. a young Mike Graham.

Gagne also trained a number of great wrestlers including Flair, Ricky Steamboat, Ken Patera, Curt Hennig, Sgt. Slaughter, Ole Anderson, Buddy Rose, Von Raschke, Larry Hennig, Iron Sheik, his son Greg, Brunzell and numerous others.

He eventually sold his tape collection to Vince McMahon, and to help market a videotape on the History of the AWA, McMahon put Gagne into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2006. Even though it was well known that Gagne's memory had faded badly by that time, as he at times could not even remember the names of his grandchildren, he got through an acceptance speech with no significant problems before the Wrestlemania event in Chicago, a city he headlined for a generation as its top "wrestling" babyface (as opposed to Dick the Bruiser & Crusher, who were the biggest draws in the city during the pre-Hogan AWA days). At that time, he was still attending regular luncheons with a group of his high school friends, but had to be driven to the events because he could no longer remember how to get to the restaurant he had been going to much of his adult life.

The WWE Hall of Fame gave him a clean sweep of virtually every pro wrestling Hall of Fame, something no other wrestler except Harley Race can claim, as even Lou Thesz is not in the WWE Hall of Fame, Ric Flair and The Funks are not in the Thesz/Tragos Hall of Fame and Jack Brisco is not in the defunct WCW Hall of Fame. Gagne was also inducted into the Minnesota Broadcasting Hall of Fame, as his "All Star Wrestling" television show was a television institution in Minneapolis, as the highest rated non-network television show in the market during most of the 60s and 70s.

When McMahon went national, after offering at first to buy Gagne, who turned him down since business was at its apex in late 1983, McMahon went after Gagne's company with a vengeance, raiding not just his top wrestlers like Hulk Hogan, Jesse Ventura, David Shults, Heenan and eventually even taking the old-timers like Mad Dog Vachon and The Crusher, but announcers Gene Okerlund, Rod Tronsguard and Rodger Kent, and even producers Al and Gary DeRusha. It was noted that many of the wrestlers thought bailing on Gagne, without giving notice, was their way of garnering revenge for how they were treated. And Gagne over the years developed a reputation for false advertising main event talent that he knew wasn't going to appear, and he continued to advertise Hogan for shows five weeks after he left his promotion, and did the same when one big star after another left.

Gagne was caught behind the times in a changing wrestling world in the 80s when he was no longer the monopoly promotion in his strongest cities. There were early signs of a significant mental decline even more than 20 years ago. But much of the legend of the decline of his company was somewhat fictitious, most notably Hogan leaving because Gagne was too stupid to give him the AWA title because he had no amateur background or wasn't a great technical wrestler.

Gagne, in fact, was planning on making Hogan his champion in 1983, but there were political issues, as Gagne had a contract with All Japan Pro Wrestling, headed by Giant Baba, to send his talent, most notably his champion. Hogan had become a superstar with New Japan Pro Wrestling after being sent by Vince McMahon Sr., before he started working with Gagne in 1981, and more because of a \$10,000 per week deal in Japan, Hogan had become one of the highest paid wrestlers in the world at the time. While Gagne likes to take credit for making Hogan a superstar, the fact was, Hogan was already a superstar on an international basis before he ever had him. But Hogan really didn't click as a U.S. draw until he showed up in the AWA as a heel, but the fans cheered him wildly, and Gagne shot an angle with him as a babyface and he was an instant hit. Hogan's Japanese dates were his priority over the AWA and was regularly missing major AWA shows because of it. Hogan didn't want to give Gagne a percentage of his New Japan

deal he already had in place, and Gagne didn't want to have his world champion make big money in Japan with his title without getting a cut, and there was also the All Japan vs. New Japan issue as those two companies were warring at the time.

And in the end, the worst thing possible for Gagne would have been to make Hogan champion, because he was still going to WWF at the end of 1983 whether he was or wasn't AWA champion, and Gagne lost his top draw, but not his champion, when he could have lost both. The hit on his business losing Hogan was significant, but it would have likely been worse had Hogan been champion because he gave no notice and Hogan had stopped doing jobs of any kind when he became one of the big four foreigners (Stan Hansen, Bruiser Brody, Hogan and Andre the Giant) in Japan. Hogan wouldn't even do a job for a fall in a two out of three fall title match in St. Louis with Harley Race in 1983 that was switched to one fall because of no viable way to work a two of three fall match.

The other fiction is that Gagne was constantly trying to make son Greg champion, and how Greg didn't have the talent for the position. In fact, Verne never made a push to make Greg champion, and before the steroid craze hit wrestling when Vince McMahon changed the business in 1984, Greg was a legitimate star who most in the territory felt Verne held back, with the idea that as long as Verne was wrestling, Greg always had to play the young son role and could never be an established star on his own. After Verne retired, with Hulk Hogan in the picture, nobody else could have possibly been the top star, and when Hogan left, the game changed and Greg, because of his physique, was no longer accepted as a viable headliner and at that point, Greg was pushed past his limitations.

MARCH 11, 2009

The Hennepin County medical examiner ruled the death of 97-year-old Helmut Gutmann was due to complications from a broken hip, and thus ruled a homicide. Gutmann is believed to have been lifted off the floor by Verne Gagne and thrown down, breaking his right hip in landing, and he then required surgery. The incident took place at the Friendship Village rest home in Bloomington, MN, on 1/26, and he died a few weeks later after refusing to eat or drink and not being able to understand why he was in no much pain because he couldn't remember the incident or understand that he had underwent surgery. The Bloomington police are investigating the incident but it is doubtful Gagne, 83, will be charged given his suffering from Alzheimer's related dementia. Ruth Hennig, the daughter of Gutmann, said that her family does not want to press charges against Gagne because of his condition. "There is no criminal intent and there's no blame to Verne Gagne. He wasn't really responsible for what he was doing, but I'm very sad my father had to die this way." Police expect to finish their investigation into the case this week.

The Gagne story got covered in such places as The Today Show and Sports Illustrated this past week. In many of the mainstream articles they claimed Gagne helped launch the careers of Hogan and Jesse Ventura. In actuality, Hogan was an international superstar and headlined with Andre, Backlund and others in WWF before he ever went to the AWA, although he did grow as a promo guy in the AWA (his growth as a worker would have been more in Japan learning from Inoki on how to handle being a real mainstream star and the New Japan workers from that period were in a different league from Verne's crew by that time). Gagne helped Hogan's career for sure because he had to carry promos on his own, while in WWF, he had Fred Blassie to cover for him. You can say the AWA was the first place where he was the main man carrying a territory as the top babyface, and the first place where his presence on a card meant thousands of extra tickets being sold. But saying Gagne launched his career is hardly close to the case, as Hogan had been in the business five years before coming there and was an international superstar before he got there. Ventura was from Minneapolis and was a veteran before he ever got a sniff from Gagne. The first place Ventura was a star was probably Portland.

MARCH 16, 2009

In a search warrant filed, it is alleged that Verne Gagne had assaulted at least two residents at Friendship Village in Bloomington, MN, before he threw 97-year-old Helmut Gutmann to the ground, which the medical examiner's office confirmed led to the man's death. The warrant lists Gutmann's death as from complications stemming from a broken hip listed as from an "unprovoked attack" by Gagne. The wording in the warrant claims Gutmann was "grabbed, shaken and thrown to the ground" by Gagne on 1/26. The warrant lists two other incidents in the last five months involving Gagne, although they were not specified. One is believed to have been involving Gutmann, who, when Gutmann according to reports was yelling loudly and wouldn't stop after Gagne asked him to, Gagne put him in the Gagne sleeper. Gutmann was scared, but not injured by the move. Minnesota has a state law against prosecuting people who can't participate in their own defense due to a mental defect, and Gagne would fit into that category.

MARCH 23, 2009

Hennepin County attorney Mike Freeman announced on 3/11 that he would not be filing any charges against Verne Gagne due to his mental condition. However, controversy over the incident continues regarding how the previous assaults involving Gagne at Friendship Village were handled. Darcy Miner, who heads the health facility inspections said that under their rules, they can't say if they are conducting an investigation, but did say if they were, it would focus on whether Friendship Village did all it reasonably could after earlier incidents. Apparently there was another attack that had not come out in previous news stories because the incident that allegedly led to Helmut Gutmann's death was the fourth such violent incident involving Gagne at the facility. The police investigation into the death of Gutmann confirmed that Gutmann and Verne Gagne had gotten into a fight in September where Gagne choked Gutmann, but didn't hurt him. Gagne had also punched another patient in the ribs in November. The fourth incident has not been described. The police report stated that the final attack by Gagne on Gutmann was unprovoked and described it that Gutmann was "grabbed, shaken and thrown to the ground."

MAY 27, 2015 (WON website article)

Verne Gagne, one of the biggest names and most influential players in the history of the pro wrestling business, passed away Monday night at the age of 89.

Gagne was a two-time NCAA champion who came into pro wrestling just as it was exploding in popularity due to television. Gagne was the babyface star of the Dumont Network at a time when the mainstream popularity of pro wrestling was the highest it ever was in the U.S., as a top ten rated network television program.

The United States television title was created for him as a rival for the NWA world heavyweight title held by Lou Thesz. This created a unique political rivalry because both worked for high percentages of the gate and were rivals for promoters booking "the champion."

Later, as wrestling's popularity faded, Gagne purchased the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club from Tony Stecher, making him a leading promoter.

In 1960, Gagne and right-hand man Wally Karbo formed the AWA in Minneapolis, and over the next decade expanded operations to cities like Winnipeg, Milwaukee, Denver, Green Bay, Chicago and throughout the Midwest.

Because of the easier schedule and high pay, the AWA was one of the places most of the top stars wanted to work if they could handle the brutal winters. Gagne made himself the perennial world champion, dominating the title though 1975, and coming back to hold it again through his first retirement in 1981.

Gagne was one of the industry's most powerful promoters for 25 years, with major peaks in the early 70s with a talent stable that included Ray Stevens, Nick Bockwinkel, Red Bastien, Superstar Billy Graham, Billy Robinson, The Crusher, Bobby Heenan, Wahoo McDaniel, Dick Murdoch, Dusty Rhodes and many others; and an even stronger run from 1981 to 1983 behind Hulk Hogan, Crusher Jerry Blackwell, Heenan, Bockwinkel, Jesse Ventura, Adrian Adonis, son Greg Gagne, Jim Brunzell and Ken Patera.

The AWA remained one of the strongest promotions through 1985, but Vince McMahon raided his talent, his office, his announcers and his producers and the last several years of the promotion were not pretty.

Gagne is in a multitude of Hall of Fames in both Minnesota sports, amateur wrestling and every major pro wrestling Hall of Fame.

Gagne had suffered from dementia for many years, including a 2009 incident where he threw down a fellow nursing home resident, Helmut Gutmann, 97, breaking his hip and Gutmann died three weeks later. While the death was ruled a homicide, Gagne was never charged due to his mental condition as he had no recollection any such thing happened.

MAY 4, 2015

Verne Gagne, one of the most influential figures in the history of pro wrestling, passed away on 4/27.

Gagne was surrounded by family at the time of his death. He was 89. Before his death, Gagne was believed to have been the second oldest living major wrestling star. Only woman wrestler Cora Combs, who is 92, was older.

Gagne had been suffering from dementia for more than a decade. He was a highly controversial figure who would have to be considered one of the greatest pro wrestlers of all-time, as well as once of its most successful promoters. He also broke in and trained some of the greatest wrestlers of the modern era.

In all facets of his career, from his days as an amateur wrestler, to being the prototype of the clean cut athletic young babyface during the heyday of pro wrestling on the Dumont Network out of Chicago where for a few years he was a household name, to being the legend in the ring to a generation in the Midwest, to running a territory, to being the older legend babyface, you could say he excelled.

But while everyone in wrestling gave him his plaudits after his death, in life he wasn't always so well loved. During the 80s, I was always told that I was the second most hated person in the pro wrestling business because of exposing all the lying and conning that went on, but no matter how many people I infuriated, I was always told that I could never top Verne Gagne for being No. 1.

Still, there were two sides to Gagne. While many wrestlers hated him with a passion, some because of the feeling that Gagne should have paid better (although wrestlers in the AWA were usually among the most well paid in the country, but he didn't pay the same percentage as promoters like Don Owen, Sam Muchnick, Paul Boesch or Jim Crockett Jr.), others because they felt he'd never step aside as the top star, he was loved by fans and worked hard in the community, particularly in support of area amateur wrestling and college sports.

Pro wrestling had a far less negative reputation in Minneapolis than most cities in North America, and much of that is due to Gagne. Because he was a legitimate sports star in his youth, while most realized wrestling wasn't real, Gagne and his wrestlers were respected as athletes and genuine tough guys. He was a member of the country club set in Minneapolis and was well respected in that world.

But there was strong ego involved in keeping himself as the perennial world champion, most notably a seven year uninterrupted reign as champion between the age of 42 and 49, at a time he had people like Nick Bockwinkel, Superstar Billy Graham, Ray Stevens, The Crusher and Billy Robinson working for him.

The most telling story of that era had to do with Crusher, who was the AWA's biggest drawing card for most of its history, even though most who weren't around believe that was Gagne. From 1969 to 1974, with very few exceptions, every time Crusher worked in Milwaukee, they sold out. Milwaukee promoter Dennis Hilgart felt Crusher was so strong in the market that if they put a Gagne vs. Crusher AWA world title match and took it to Milwaukee County Stadium, that he guaranteed Gagne they could break the Pat O'Connor vs. Buddy Rogers attendance record of 38,622 fans. However, Hilgart also noted that with Crusher, a native whose nickname was, "The man who made Milwaukee famous," as the top draw and being a guy that everyone in town thought nobody could beat straight-up, that for the health of the market, Crusher had to win it. This was during Gagne's "record-setting" reign. The idea proposed was for Crusher to keep the title for a short period of time, and either drop it to a cheating heel, who would then lose it back to Gagne (really the best course of action), or even dropping it back to Gagne, just not in Milwaukee. Gagne nixed the idea of losing the title, particularly to another babyface.

And even after losing the title to Bockwinkel in 1975, he was always positioned as the top contender and top babyface, even though he didn't work a full-time schedule. To lead into his retirement, he won the title for a final time at the age of 54, from Bockwinkel, and then pinned him to retain the title in what was billed as his retirement match on May 19, 1981, before 17,000 fans at the St. Paul Civic Center.

Gagne came back for a number of matches after that point. His first comeback match, on April 24, 1983, for "Super Sunday," a double main event with Gagne & Mad Dog Vachon vs. Sheik Adnan Al-Kaissie & Sheik Ayatollah Jerry Blackwell, combined with Hulk Hogan challenging Nick Bockwinkel for the AWA title, not only sold out the St. Paul Civic Center with 19,000 fans, but drew another 5,000 for the closed-circuit overflow at the St. Paul Auditorium. But after what appeared to be a great ending of his career, and a coming out of retirement match, he kept coming back until the public no longer cared as his AWA limped into oblivion. By the end, wrestling into his 60s, he'd come back and in his final matches suffered rib and foot injuries trying to do what he did in his youth.

Between his 16 versions of the world title, mostly the AWA title in the Midwest, Gagne's total tenure as a major promotion world champion was the longest of any wrestler in history.

In January, 2000, when Sports Illustrated did a feature ranking the 50 greatest athletes from all 50 states during the 20th century, they listed Gagne as No. 24, from his home state of Minnesota.

Gagne was a star football player and high school state champion wrestler in 1943. He played both sports in college, playing both tight end and defensive end at the University of Minnesota, where he was a teammate of Bud Grant and Leo Nomellini. To show how different football was in those days, Gagne started both ways in those positions, at 6-feet tall and 197 pounds.

Published reports at the time of his death that he was all-Big 10 and honorable mention All-American were exaggerated. But Gagne was the 145th player taken in the 1947 NFL draft, as the 16th round pick by the Chicago Bears. Legend has it that Gagne never signed with the Bears because was told by Bears owner George Halas that he could not do pro wrestling, as Halas had problems in the past with Bronko Nagurski doing pro wrestling (Nagurski quit the Bears in his prime to be a pro

wrestler after a salary dispute, and would actually wrestle during the NFL season and not even practice with the team, just flying in on Sundays for games). But that story doesn't hold up since Gagne didn't even start pro wrestling for several more years. Gagne, because he missed two years of college serving in World War II, still had football and wrestling eligibility left so in 1947, his decision would have been more based on whether to stay in college or to go to the NFL, and pro wrestling would not have been a factor.

He did play in the 1949 College All-Star football game. In that era, the top college seniors would play against the NFL champions from the previous year, that year being the Philadelphia Eagles.

After college, Gagne did tryout as a free agent for the Green Bay Packers in 1949, played three pre-season games, and was cut. Later, at the behest of Nomellini, the San Francisco 49ers offered Gagne a contract in 1951, with the idea he'd play football during the season and continue to wrestle in the off-season, like Nomellini. By that point Gagne was already almost a household name as a television wrestling star and earning far more money than he could have as a football player, so the offer was more a publicity stunt.

Gagne was a wrestling standout, winning NCAA titles in 1948 and 1949 at the University of Minnesota. Gagne was involved in one of the most famous and historical college wrestling matches in history, in the NCAA tournament heavyweight finals on March 26, 1949, in Fort Collins, CO.

Gagne, a senior, was giving up substantial weight as a slightly under 200 pound heavyweight, facing Dick Hutton, a junior, from Oklahoma A&M, who had gone undefeated for three seasons, as the 1947 and 1948 heavyweight champion and had represented the U.S. in the Olympics the prior year.

Gagne had won his NCAA title the prior year at 191 pounds, the first year of that weight class. Previously, the heaviest weight class before unlimited (there was no top limit on heavyweights in that era) was 175 pounds. Gagne wrestled heavyweight in three of his four seasons in college, only going to 191 in 1948 because it was an Olympic year and the Olympics had a 191.5 pound weight division.

The two were expected to meet in the finals. In 1947, Hutton beat Gagne 2-1 in the semifinals, and Gagne came back to take third place. In the 1949 match, the two went to an overtime draw in a defensive match, with neither able to take the other down and each getting one escape, being tied 1-1 after regulation. They went into overtime, and neither could score. Hutton would always claim that Gagne stalled his way to that draw, that he'd stay near the outskirts of the circle and step out when Hutton would try and do an offensive move. Still, it was Gagne who got the referees decision after the overtime. Hutton wasn't happy about the decision, but always said that Gagne was his toughest adversary as a college wrestler.

Hutton came back to win the 1950 heavyweight title, so the overtime loss prevented him from not only being the first-ever four-time NCAA champion (and he would still be the only heavyweight to have accomplished that), but also being the first Cael Sanderson, who is still the only four-time unbeaten NCAA champion (during periods where freshman couldn't compete at the varsity level, there were a few three-season NCAA champions who went unbeaten in college, including pro wrestling Hall of Famers Earl McCready and Danny Hodge, as well as the Japanese version of Danny Hodge, Yojiro Uetake.). Hutton later became NWA world heavyweight champion, but Hutton never wrestled Gagne as a pro wrestler.

Gagne lost in the 1948 Olympic trials to Henry Wittenberg for the 191.5-pound weight class spot. Wittenberg was the best American wrestler of that era, and the belief is had it not been for the war canceling the 1940 and 1944 Olympics, he'd have been a multiple-time gold medalist. Wittenberg captured the gold medal in 1948, and later said that Gagne was tougher in the trials than anyone was at the Olympics. The U.S. sent Gagne to London for the Olympics. In those days, Greco-Roman wrestling wasn't practiced in the U.S. and up to that point, the U.S. only sent a freestyle team. However, the depth of U.S. wrestling talent was considered so strong that it was decided in 1948, that everyone who

placed second in the Olympic trials, which included Gagne and future pro wrestler Joe Scarpello, would represent the country in the Greco-Roman competition. But when they got to London, the Olympic committee refused to allow them to compete since none of them had ever actually competed under Greco-Roman rules.

Pro wrestling exploded in popularity when television started taking off in late 1947 and Gorgeous George became a gigantic star. A number of top amateur stars in that era went into pro wrestling, although none had the success of Gagne.

He was recruited by Tony Stecher, who headed the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club, the brother of the legendary Joe Stecher and one of the key power brokers in the country at the time.

Barely five weeks after his win over Hutton, Gagne debuted as a pro wrestler to great fanfare on May 3, 1949, facing Abe Kashey in Minneapolis. Stecher thought he had a future superstar in Gagne, to the point that to get even more attention for his debut, he brought in Jack Dempsey, the legendary boxer, to referee the match.

Within a few months, Gagne was a main eventer in Texas, winning the Texas heavyweight title, one of pro wrestling's major regional belts at the time, on two occasions. Then, on November 13, 1950, in Tulsa, he defeated Sonny Myers in a tournament final for the NWA world junior heavyweight title. The title was vacant because Leroy McGuirk, who had held the title since 1939, had his career end when he was blinded in an auto accident earlier that year.

Gagne was a major star on the Dumont Network out of Chicago as the world junior heavyweight champion, and immediately became a top rival of heavyweight champion Lou Thesz. The accuracy of this can be disputed, but newspaper reports in that time period listed the top drawing stars of that era, Thesz, George, Gagne, Hans Schmidt and Argentina Rocca as being the highest paid athletes in sports with the exception of the heavyweight boxing champion. The top five wrestlers reportedly all topped the \$100,000 per year of the highest paid team sports athlete of the era, Joe DiMaggio of the New York Yankees. Jim Barnett, who worked for Fred Kohler, who had the national TV time slot with the Dumont Network and booked Gagne and Schmidt around the country, claimed those figures were accurate. A U.S. Justice Department investigation of pro wrestling a few years later listed earnings of the top stars substantially lower (\$50,000 to \$80,000), but that was also after wrestling's popularity decline with losing network television.

Gagne was the rising top babyface when Kohler's show was among the ten most popular prime time television shows in the country. Those who were alive in the 1920s, a sports heyday, the early 50s, the television heyday, and the Monday Night Wars boom of 1998 to 2001, almost all state that for mainstream popularity and name recognition of stars, the early 50s was the strongest period for pro wrestling mainstream popularity in the U.S.

Saying Gagne was as big as Hulk Hogan, however, would be an exaggeration, but he was a household name that even non-sports fans knew. He was probably not as famous as Hogan or Dwayne Johnson, but was also likely more famous than Steve Austin, although he never drew among wrestling fans like Austin.

The politics involving Gagne and the NWA world title that he seemed likely to eventually win came down in 1952 and 1953.

What happened was the NWA booked Thesz on a show with a rival promoter in Chicago. Kohler, furious, decided he would no longer use the NWA world champion. So he created a new championship, the United States TV champion, to put on Gagne, and with the power of his national television exposure, booked him similarly to the world champion. For a promoter to get Gagne, they had to pay Gagne 10 percent of the gross, and pay Kohler's office three percent. It was the same deal the NWA had with Thesz. While Thesz had the aura of being the world champion, Gagne was the champion featured on national television. After the title was established in late 1953, and until wrestling lost its national coverage with the falling of the Dumont Network, Gagne

and his U.S. TV championship were a bigger draw than Thesz and his NWA world heavyweight title.

But the NWA power-brokers were not happy with the creation of a title that they believed was in competition with their own title, and costing the NWA lucrative dates.

Legend also had it that when Thesz and Gagne had a 60 minute draw, that Gagne told Thesz that it was the last time that would happen. Like many stories years later, it is probable that never happened. While Gagne was the superior freestyle wrestler, he was not trained in submissions like Thesz, nor was he as quick. Debating who could win in a shoot was silly even then when it came to a pro wrestling world title match, even though there were a few instances where people did try to shoot on Thesz and take the title over the years. But they were extremely rare and Thesz did make examples out of them.

Still, even though Gagne was one of the top stars, he and Thesz didn't cross paths for years. Stories that Thesz refused to drop the title to Gagne were also not true, and both men respected the other greatly as athletes. The NWA liked having Thesz as champion and even though he could be tough on promoters, there was never a movement to take the title from him. In 1956, he voluntarily dropped it for a few months to go on vacation, putting it in the hands of Canadian legend Whipper Billy Watson, a good friend, with the deal that Watson was to give it back. In 1957, when Thesz wanted to give up the title because he saw the amount of money he could earn internationally, and with wrestling exploding in Japan under Rikidozan, he wanted to work there while the NWA wanted him staying in the U.S. Because of the bad feelings regarding Gagne taking NWA champion dates and the fact the NWA was back on top, Gagne was never considered for the title. The NWA wanted Buddy Rogers, who at the time they felt was the biggest box office star in the country. Thesz refused, disliking Rogers for a remark he had made about Thesz's idol and good friend Ed "Strangler" Lewis years earlier, and made it his mission that he'd work with Rogers anytime, but would never give Rogers the satisfaction of beating him.

In 1957, Thesz first dropped the title to Edouard Carpentier in Chicago in a disputed match. At the time, the NWA actually booked both Thesz and Carpentier as champions with the idea there would be a unification match, that Carpentier would win, and Thesz would tour all over the world as International heavyweight champion. Thesz had been world champion since 1949 and with news traveling slow, the idea was that fans all over the world would think Thesz's International belt was the world title they'd all heard about. However, there were huge problems between Sam Muchnick, who headed the NWA, and Montreal promoter Eddie Quinn, who Carpentier worked for. Quinn wanted Carpentier to stay a regular in his territory, since he was his golden goose at the time. He was also mad when the NWA allowed Jack Pfefer, who Quinn hated, into the alliance, and quit the NWA shortly after the Thesz-Carpentier disputed title match.

Thesz wanted to drop it to someone legit. At that time, Gagne would have been the best bet given Thesz's parameters. But neither he nor the NWA even considered him. Thesz's choices were George Gordienko, who had no real name in the U.S., but by legend was the toughest guy in wrestling at that time, or Hutton, who Thesz believed was the best actual wrestler in the business at the time. They were unable to get Gordienko into the country because of the remnants of McCarthyism, and Gordienko being labeled a communist sympathizer. That's why Gordienko was a legend all over the world, but was never a star in the U.S. So it was Hutton.

Carpentier was used by promoters to create their own world titles since he had beaten Thesz, and never lost it back. Thesz did beat Carpentier via DQ in a match used to settle the difference from an historical standpoint), as the unification match never happened. The NWA just stopped recognizing Carpentier. Carpentier's supposed lineal legacy led to the creation of the WWA world title in California, and in some versions of history, the AWA has claimed its inception from the legacy.

On August 9, 1958, Gagne beat Carpentier in Omaha to win that version of the world title. It should be noted that Gagne lost that title to Wilbur

Snyder three months later, so he was not that version of world champion (Bill Miller was) when the AWA title was created.

In 1959, Tony Stecher, the man who recruited Gagne into pro wrestling, passed away. At the time, Stecher and Wally Karbo were partners in the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club. Gagne, the top star in the territory, purchased the majority stake from Dennis Stecher, Tony's son.

His creation of the American Wrestling Association (this was not the first AWA in pro wrestling) came in 1960. In May of that year, on Minneapolis television, it was announced that Gagne, the No. 1 contender, was issuing a challenge to NWA champion Pat O'Connor. The storyline was that it had been years since Gagne had gotten an NWA title shot and they were giving O'Connor 90 days to defend the title against Gagne or be stripped of the title. Gagne used an offshoot of this angle as a storyline in the movie, "The Wrestler." In the movie, Mike Bullard, the long-time champion, who was played by and was Gagne, was threatened with being stripped of the title unless he defended against Billy Taylor, who was played by Billy Robinson. However, in the movie, the match actually took place.

This storyline only applied to Minnesota, as Gagne had withdrawn from the NWA, which at the time was fading in power. Carpentier had already been billed as NAWA world champion starting in 1959 when the Los Angeles promotion withdrew from the NWA (the NAWA title was renamed the WWA title in 1961). Carpentier went to both Omaha in 1958 to create the Big Time Wrestling world heavyweight title, and Boston that same year to create the AAC world title.

Hutton had been a poor choice as champion and didn't draw, so promoters withdrew with the idea they could just make their own champion. O'Connor, who beat Hutton, was an incredible worker, as good as anyone in the business, but wasn't a big draw either. Rogers, who then beat O'Connor, was, but that resulted in even more problems, that nearly killed the NWA. After Muchnick made the deal to bring Thesz back as champion in 1963, several promotions came back to the NWA, and the three major acquisitions came with Los Angeles in 1968, San Francisco (one of the strongest regional promotions at the time) in 1968, and Vince McMahon's WWWF in 1971. Gagne, however, never returned, although he worked in cooperation with the NWA, aside from a short-lived and failed attempt in 1969 to go against the local office. It was Gagne's move into Los Angeles, getting television in 1968 and talking about running shows, that led to the Southern California office rejoining the NWA, because it gave them access to top talent from around the country for what was expected to be a war.

The Los Angeles attempt, followed by his 1981 move into San Francisco against Roy Shire, makes the later complaints by Gagne about Vince McMahon invading his territory and violating the longstanding rules of wrestling in 1984, to ring hollow. Shire's territory was nearly dead when Gagne made the move, but Shire had entered into a new agreement with Eddie Graham to provide headline talent for the Cow Palace.

Gagne had gotten KTVU, the station Shire had in the 60s during his most successful run. The station had dropped Shire more than a decade earlier when the arrogant Shire came to the station's plush offices, and as he regularly did, was told not to, and ignored, spit tobacco juice on their expensive rugs. Shire felt he was bullet proof because of the ratings he was delivering the station, but by that time, the station had grown in popularity and no longer needed wrestling.

There was irony there because in 1960, Jim Barnett, who was not an NWA member, got a sponsor and a deal with KTVU, and sent Shire to establish the territory, which Shire called the AWA. The area already had an NWA promotion run by Joe Malciwicz that featured Nomellini as his biggest drawing card, that was doing so-so presenting an older style of wrestling. They were quickly put out of business because Shire had such strong television and set the market on fire. Shire never used Nomellini on top when he started, because he was the top star from the old promotion, and there was never a Ray Stevens vs. Leo Nomellini match at the Cow Palace. Shire then joined the NWA in 1968. Gagne made a deal with Nomellini, his old college football teammate and tag team partner in the 50s as world tag team champions, to be his front man. With the Nomellini name as promoter, the invading AWA was the

babyface to the media, and had no sympathy for Shire, since he never bothered with things like media relations because he made money without being nice to anyone.

When Gagne got his TV in town in 1980 and started talking about promoting shows, Shire called Barnett, at that point the booker of the NWA champion and Secretary and Treasurer of the NWA, and told him to tell Gagne it was his territory. Barnett told me he made the call, and Gagne didn't listen. Rather than fight against someone he couldn't beat, Shire closed up shop, and bitter, exposed the business and gave depositions in the Jim Wilson lawsuit against his former NWA partners.

As you can imagine, since Gagne had already withdrawn from the NWA, O'Connor was never scheduled to come to Minneapolis, and Gagne made himself world champion of the newly created American Wrestling Association. For the next two decades, he was virtually always either the champion, or the top babyface chasing champions like Crusher, Gene Kiniski, Mad Dog Vachon, Big Bill Miller, Dr. X (Dick Beyer) and Bockwinkel.

During that period he expanded the AWA throughout the Midwest, with its key cities being Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Denver, Winnipeg, Green Bay, Chicago and all points in between. Later, they went into Omaha, Salt Lake City, the San Francisco Bay Area, Phoenix and Las Vegas, and for a time worked with Ed Francis on regular major shows in Honolulu. While Gagne didn't wrestle much in the Midwest, he seemed to work Honolulu all the time.

Gagne promoted a more manageable schedule than most. While the road trips were long, and the winters were horrible, there were more days off than most promotions. While criticized as far as the percentages he paid, wrestlers made more working less dates than almost any territory. While the WWF could pay more, for most except the top few babyfaces, it was a place people came for a year and left. The AWA had slower turnaround than most places, with talent getting several year runs. Bockwinkel came in 1970 and stayed until his retirement in 1987.

In the late 70s, when Bockwinkel was AWA champion, Fritz Von Erich approached him with the idea of becoming NWA champion. Bockwinkel said that at the time, he was earning \$150,000 per year, and believed Harley Race, the NWA champion, was doing about \$350,000 per year. He compared his schedule with that of Race, and decided he had the better life.

The usual year in the AWA was that they worked a full schedule starting in September. Just before summer, Gagne and Crusher would get into an argument over money, and Crusher would quit. Then the two would make up in September. While that didn't happen every year, it became wrestling legend to the point where Gagne would book cage matches in the spring with Crusher figuring he'd get them in before the blow-up. When Hulk Hogan arrived in 1981, Crusher and Gagne didn't make up until the end of 1983, just as Hogan left.

"He was the goose that laid the golden eggs," Bobby Heenan said about Crusher. "The one day, a new goose came that was laying bigger eggs."

Gagne himself liked to promote less frequently in the summer so he could take vacations. Most of his wrestlers were big enough names that they could easily get work in other territories if they wanted to on their more frequent off days, and others would use the time off to take their families on vacations.

The AWA business was usually steady. It caught fire in 1970 after an angle went awry. The Vachon Brothers were battling Edouard Carpentier & a dark-haired prelim wrestler named Buddy Smith (later to become Buddy Roberts). The Vachons has taken out Smith and were double-teaming Carpentier. Crusher made the save. As Mad Dog was blading himself, Crusher stomped on his head, driving his head into the blade and cutting an artery. Mad Dog nearly bled to death. Blood went everywhere. The Minneapolis station where they taped, with Mad Dog's blood all over their curtains, nearly canceled wrestling. But people were in such shock from the blood that Crusher vs. Mad Dog matches, particularly cage matches, broke gate records in almost every city.

Business got even stronger with the emergence of Bockwinkel & Ray Stevens as world tag team champions, Billy Robinson as the top technical wrestler, promo-king Superstar Billy Graham as the top singles heel with his great working Russian heel comrade Ivan Koloff. Graham did almost identical arm wrestling angles with Wahoo McDaniel, and later Crusher, where he'd be about to lose at his specialty when he'd turn the table over on them and they'd bleed. Both programs did record business. During that period, Gagne was more a promoter than wrestler. He was world champion, but only worked a show or two per month, not appearing regularly in any city. He made himself special, as when Gagne would be on the show as champion, they'd raise ticket prices \$1 across the board. They didn't need him to draw on the monthly shows in the big markets because the tag champions, Graham and Crusher were doing great. But he positioned himself as being at a level above all of them.

Gagne usually worked with heels like Stevens, Koloff and Bockwinkel, the best workers of that era, as his opponents. He worked some with Graham, since he was money. He always wanted to look strong and have time stand still. The 48 year old Gagne wanted people to see him as the 27-year-old Gagne. But he did understand how to work a face program with Robinson. Gagne knew his role in that program was to play subtle heel champion, because Robinson was the full-timer, and he had pushed Robinson as the greatest technical wrestler in the world. In the early years Gagne would only wrestle Robinson on rare occasions, but build them up as if they were the ultimate battle. The usual booking was that Robinson would win the first fall, and be on the verge of winning the second when Gagne would get disqualified, thus saving the title. Once Robinson's star started falling, Gagne would start beating him, but not until Robinson had been in the promotion for years and was no longer the top babyface. However, during that era, Gagne would never wrestle Crusher, even though the two were legendary rivals in the 60s when Crusher was a heel.

With Robinson, who had coached wrestling, Gagne started doing annual wrestling camps to bring in new stars. Gagne would train wrestlers, who would pay him and also as part of the deal, if they survived, he would act as their booking agent and would get ten percent of their future earnings.

Among the names Gagne and Robinson trained and broke in included Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat, The Iron Sheik, Jim Brunzell, Greg Gagne, Chris Taylor, Ken Patera, Sgt. Slaughter, Curt Hennig, Steve Olsonoski, Buddy Rose and Brad Rheingans. Before Robinson was around, Gagne also broke in names like Baron Von Raschke, Blackjack Mulligan, Dale Lewis, Gene Anderson, Ole Anderson and Lars Anderson.

The camps were ridiculously grueling, and described by many as torture, particularly when working with Robinson.

Things slowed down in the late 70s with an aging crew, but they also mixed in some younger talent, including The High Flyers, Verne's son Greg, with partner Jim Brunzell, and their arch-rivals, The East-West Connection of Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura.

In 1981, things would change for the better, but it ultimately led to the worst. Hulk Hogan was brought in as a heel, managed by Johnny Valiant. But the crowd loved Hogan. Gagne quickly sensed what was happening, got rid of Valiant, and shot an angle where Hogan bodyslammed Jerry Blackwell, who may have been the most hated heel at the time for putting Crusher out of action.

Hogan and the crew from that era destroyed all the records set by the 70s crew. While WWE today claims Hulkamania was born in 1984, the term Hulkamania started being used on AWA TV in 1981. While they later had a falling out, and legend has it that Gagne didn't understand and was out of touch to Hogan's popularity, the reality is exactly the opposite. Gagne taught Hogan how to play babyface on a major league level, as well as helped him develop his interview style. While he could draw from the start, Hogan was somewhat green and stiff on interviews when he came to the AWA. But within a year, had his character completely dialed in, between the Rocky music, the tearing T-shirts, and the phrase "Hulkamania," which Hogan copied from Austin Idol and "Idolmania" in the Gulf Coast territory. He already had the charisma, but

apart from regional groups, had usually worked as a heel. The formula was simple. Hogan, while more versatile, was just a younger and more modern version of Crusher, and was booked almost identical. While Crusher rarely lost, and in his heyday, only to set up a cage match return, Hogan never lost.

The AWA expanded. Its television was slower and the quality of wrestling was well below promotions of that era such as Mid Atlantic, Georgia and others with a more modern in-ring style. But in the places they flourished, most fans weren't seeing anything else, so that was what wrestling was to them, and Gagne always presented a wide variety of unique and colorful characters. Plus, the interviews with the likes of Ventura, Bobby Heenan, Bockwinkel, Mad Dog and others, handled by Gene Okerlund, were as good as anywhere in the country. Verne himself, as the calm, wise, babyface father figure was extremely underrated as the antithesis of the characters that filled up his roster. The Gagne character in Minneapolis was the prototype for the Georges St-Pierre clean-cut babyface hard-training sports hero character as the antithesis of the big talking and more unique rivals.

Gagne had retired as an active wrestler and things were never bigger. But things were about to change.

We'll have a major feature story on Gagne in a few weeks, covering his sports career in more detail, as well as the fall of the AWA.

MAY 11, 2015

The funeral for Verne Gagne, one of the most influential people in the history of pro wrestling, took place on 5/5 in Eden Prairie, MN. Among the names who attended either the visitation or the funeral were Larry Hennig (notable because Hennig was very outspoken about not liking Gagne), Wayne Bloom, Brad Rheingans, Mick Karch, Derrick Dukes, Frankie DeFalco, Jake Milliman, Jim Brunzell, John Nord, Kenny Jay, Gene Okerlund, Dan Jessor, Doug Fisher, Paul Ellering, Steve Olsonoski, Baron Von Raschke, Eddie Sharkey (who once shot up Verne's office after Verne made a pass at his then-wife, woman wrestler Princess Little Cloud), and Bob Backlund. Okerlund and Greg Gagne delivered eulogies. Okerlund finished his speech by doing an interview introduction for "the heavyweight champion of the world, Verne Gagne," and everyone gave it a standing ovation. Others there included a number of media members, former Minnesota Vikings coach Bud Grant (who was a football teammate of Gagne's in the late 40s at the University of Minnesota), and Tony Nagurski, Bronko's son. The lone negative thing is that Backlund started yelling out what was described as a heel promo at Greg Gagne while Greg was delivering the eulogy that was described as ridiculously out of place.

A note regarding last week's story on Gagne. While Gagne and Dick Hutton never had a singles match against each other as pro wrestlers after their legendary match at the 1949 NCAA championships, they did face off twice in tag team matches. On March 6, 1957, at the Forum, Hutton & Dick the Bruiser went to a draw with Gagne & Edouard Carpentier. The next week, they headlined before 10,000 fans with Hutton & Bruiser & Killer Kowalski going to a no contest with Gagne & Carpentier & Pat O'Connor. It should be noted that Hutton became a pro wrestler because he read a newspaper story about how Gagne was making \$100,000 a year as a pro wrestler, and since Gagne was his toughest rival as a college wrestler, he figured that may be a good business to get into.

MAY 18, 2015

The Bob Backlund scene at the Verne Gagne funeral has gotten a lot of talk since we reported it last week. According to Backlund, he sat quietly through the ceremony and Greg Gagne started talking about Vince

McMahon Sr. and Vince McMahon Jr. (Verne Gagne and Vince Jr. never got along for the obvious business reasons, although whatever animosity existed from a WWE corporate side toward the AWA in the 80s is long gone) and Backlund stood up and said, "Hey, Greg, just wanted you to know that I'm here representing Vince McMahon and the WWE, and we all just wanted to pay our respects and express our condolences to you and to your family from everyone in WWE." He said Greg thanked him, Bob sat down, and Greg continued. He said Bob wanted everyone to know the WWE was paying their respects to the family and that Bob exchanged pleasantries with Greg after and nobody was upset by what happened. Bob said that he had known Verne since he was in high school and Verne had been at some of his high school wrestling matches (Verne, a big supporter of area wrestling, likely would have attended the state high school meet when Bob competed in it) and claimed Verne would have liked what he did. From talking to two people at the funeral, that is not what happened and that Backlund interrupted Greg's eulogy and started shouting at him about WWE, that Greg seemed uncomfortable about it and that it was not a work, and most there, a lot of whom were retired area wrestlers, felt it was totally inappropriate. Mick Karch, the former AWA announcer, on his Facebook page wrote about all the people who weren't at the Verne Gagne funeral who claimed the Bob Backlund story was made up: "If you weren't there, it is pretty absurd to say it didn't go down as reported, even if you're a fan of Backlund (and there is nothing wrong with that). I will say one more time, Greg Gagne was wrapping up his eulogy for Verne when Backlund stood up, made some shouting references to representing WWE, and then told Greg, 'Don't talk back to me!' He smiled and sat back down. Greg's response was, 'Who was that?' Someone said, 'Bob Backlund,' and Greg responded, 'Who let him in here.' Backlund hadn't just spoken the words, he was shouting as if he was cutting a promo from his Mr. Backlund days."

AUGUST 24, 2015

This past weekend was the 55th anniversary of the birth of the most famous of the many organizations that went by the AWA moniker during the 20th century.

The anniversary came less than four months after the death of its owner, and its perennial world champion until the final decade of its existence, Laverne Clarence "Verne" Gagne.

Gagne, who passed away at the age of 89 on 4/27, was the most popular young babyface wrestler in the country during the early days of television.

Gagne was a starting tight end and two-time NCAA wrestling champion at the University of Minnesota, as well as a member of the 1948 Olympic team, even though he actually never competed in the London Olympics. He had lost in the freestyle finals to Henry Wittenberg, the country's best wrestler of that era, who won the gold medal that year. Wittenberg came back from London and said that Gagne was better than anyone he faced in the Olympics.

At the time, there was no Greco-Roman wrestling practiced in the U.S. The decision was made that the second place finishers at the Olympic freestyle finals would represent the U.S. in Greco-Roman wrestling. But when they got to London, the international officials wouldn't allow them to compete due to lack of experience under those rules and style.

Gagne had legitimate pro football offers. He was drafted by the Chicago Bears in the 16th round in 1947, but opted to return to college and continue with the Golden Gophers and go for an NCAA title and chase the Olympic gold medal in wrestling instead.

Once college was over, he played in the College Football All-Star game, but pro wrestling had just gotten hot on national television and he was recruited. Before the 1949 pro football season, when he was already on the road to pro wrestling stardom, he still gave pro football a try. He played three pre-season games for the Green Bay Packers, but was a late cut. Being cut was probably the most fortunate thing for his career.

He was also offered a contract by the San Francisco 49ers in 1951, as by that time, due to television, he was one of the best known athletes in the country as a pro wrestler. But instead of being a marginal pro football player, he became one of the most influential men in the history of pro wrestling.

After starting in Minneapolis, he moved on to Texas, and just seven months into his career, he was the top babyface in that territory, beating Sonny Myers in a tournament final to win the Texas heavyweight title. He moved onto Chicago in the spring of 1950, the hub of wrestling in the Midwest, with matches from Marigold Arena airing weekly in prime time on the DuMont Network, which would be equivalent to the FOX Network today. During Gagne's first year, wrestling was the 10th highest rated prime time television show in the country. Gagne was the right guy in the right place. He was a good looking legitimate wrestler, the classic All-American boy that the audiences in that era gravitated to.

Leroy McGuirk, another ex-NCAA champion who had been the perennial National Wrestling Alliance world junior heavyweight champion, saw his career end due to being blinded after an auto accident. On November 13, 1950, Gagne went to Tulsa and won the tournament to become champion in what was the under-200 pound weight division. This led to his first series of matches with NWA world heavyweight champion Lou Thesz. He also beat Billy Goetz in Milwaukee to capture the National Wrestling Association version of the title.

After dropping the title to Danny McShain in Memphis, he competed as a small heavyweight and became one of the biggest drawing cards in the country. Newspaper stories at the time listed Gagne as one of the highest paid athletes in the country, topping \$100,000 per year at a time when no baseball player or football player was earning that much. While there is much dispute over those numbers, Jim Barnett, who worked as Fred Kohler's right hand man in the promotion, who booked Gagne and Hans Schmidt around the country, said that figure was legitimate. Joe DiMaggio, who retired in 1951, a baseball legend with the New York Yankees was the first \$100,000 a year team sports athlete, and it was years before another baseball player hit six figures. Nobody in football or basketball would reach that level until the 60s. Probably the only athlete of the time that earned more than the top wrestlers was the heavyweight boxing champion.

Then, politics changed the course of Gagne's career. NWA President Sam Muchnick booked Thesz in Chicago for a date with a rival promoter. Kohler responded by no longer booking the world champion. In his place, he created the United States TV championship. Gagne was named the first champion in September, 1953. He had already had his first run as a world heavyweight champion for what was called the AWA, Eddie Quinn's promotion based out of Montreal.

Gagne was the most popular wrestler in Kohler's stable, and also, like Thesz, a very legitimate wrestler. He was the obvious choice to be champion. While double-crosses were almost gone by that time, promoters still felt it was safer to have their world champion be someone who could actually wrestle in case a rogue promoter or wrestler wanted to make a reputation on a national star.

Gagne and Thesz had wrestled all over the country in NWA world title matches starting in late 1950 in Texas, and with both being national stars off television, they took their matches all over the country.

Thesz never beat Gagne. Early on, they would go to 60 minute draws as a way to protect the value of both the heavyweight and the junior heavyweight titles. The idea is if the junior heavyweight champion lost to the heavyweight champion, the public would see him as a secondary champion. After Gagne lost the junior heavyweight, he and Thesz continued to almost always go to one hour draws, likely with the idea that Gagne was the probable heir apparent to the title. Even though they ended up on different sides politically, Thesz never had anything bad to say about Gagne or his matches with him, considering them some of his best of the era, and noting how much he enjoyed going 60 minutes regularly with someone of his ability. He always listed Gagne as one of the greatest wrestlers he ever faced. In the late 60s, after Thesz had lost

the NWA title for the last time, Gagne did bring him in and finally got to beat him.

In all of their meetings, we actually only have records of Thesz beating Gagne twice, both in Thesz's home city of St. Louis, where he was both the hometown hero, world champion, and co-promoter. On March 28, 1952, before 12,402 fans, Thesz beat Gagne in 39:50. It was the largest crowd in the city in one year, since Thesz had defended against Buddy Rogers. A rematch, on March 27, 1953, drew 13,000 fans with Thesz winning in 49:40. You would think those crowds would lead to more matches in St. Louis, as well as in cities like Chicago where they did sellout business.

But being given the U.S. TV title changed everything.

Kohler no longer used Thesz, so while he was the world champion and did appear on television all over the country, he was not on the most popular show. Gagne was the champion on that show, and Kohler booked his champion similarly to how Muchnick booked Thesz. To get Gagne, Fred Kohler Enterprises would get ten percent of the live gate, actually slightly undercutting the 13 percent that the NWA was charging. Many promoters booked Gagne instead of Thesz, since he had become more popular since he was the top babyface on the most-watched television show.

Once Gagne became champion, he never received another NWA title match.

When there was a war for the top position in Chicago, Thesz and Gagne often worked in main events on opposite sides during the same week, defending their titles, with Gagne outdrawing Thesz most of the time. Eventually, Kohler and the NWA settled their issues. Thesz was back as champion and Gagne and Thesz often worked on the same shows, but never against one another.

After the June 14, 1957 match in Chicago between Thesz and Edouard Carpentier, where Thesz lost a controversial decision when he suffered a supposed back injury in the third fall and couldn't continue, but wasn't pinned or submitted, the NWA actually booked both men as champion for a short period of time. The idea was to build to a match in St. Louis where Carpentier would beat Thesz again to officially win the title. Thesz had gotten a lucrative offer from Rikidozan to wrestle a series of stadium shows in Japan in 1957, and the NWA owners at the time, not understanding Japan, didn't want their champion out of the country.

Eddie Quinn, the Montreal promoter, had a falling out with the NWA over them allowing Jack Pfefer into the group. In addition, Quinn wanted Carpentier, his biggest drawing card, in Quebec a few days every week, even as world champion, which wasn't going to work out. Quinn had posted the bond for Carpentier and asked for it back and said Carpentier was no longer champion. Thesz instead, after coming back from Japan where the Thesz vs. Rikidozan matches were billed as NWA world title matches, dropped the title to Dick Hutton, his hand-picked replacement. Most promoters would have preferred Buddy Rogers, a far bigger draw. But Thesz didn't like Rogers at all, feeling he was disrespectful to Thesz's mentor and idol, Ed "Strangler" Lewis, and refused to put him over.

That probably would have been the right time to put the title on Gagne, who was a far bigger star than Hutton, but it was never considered due to the heat over the U.S. TV title matches getting bookings the NWA thought its champion should be getting. Not only did Gagne not get considered for the title, but he still never got a title shot.

Gagne had lost the U.S. TV title to Wilbur Snyder, but regained it in Chicago on April 11, 1958, from Dick the Bruiser. Carpentier then came to Omaha still billed as world champion from the Thesz win, and lost his version of the title to Gagne, making him a dual champion in several Midwest cities including Chicago. But he lost both titles to Snyder on November 15, 1958, in Omaha. However, in Chicago, he was still billed as world champion through December, and never lost the title in the ring. But he was no longer billed as champion in 1959.

At about the same time, Gagne had purchased controlling interest in the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club. The NWA title had gone from Hutton to Pat O'Connor, once again, with Gagne not even under consideration due to his role in undercutting the championship years earlier.

The feeling at the time is that Gagne wanted the title, and if they had given him the title, there probably would not have been an AWA. But by that point Rogers was on fire as the biggest drawing card in wrestling. Chicago had been drawing poorly until Rogers came in as the U.S. champion, to build for a world title vs. U.S. title match in the summer of 1961 at Comiskey Park in Chicago, where Rogers won the title before 38,622 fans.

In May of 1960, it was announced on Minneapolis television that O'Connor had refused to defend the title against Gagne, the local star and the No.1 contender. It was noted that despite being one of the biggest stars in wrestling, Gagne had not received an NWA world title shot since 1953. So they claimed that if O'Connor didn't sign for a match with Gagne within 90 days, he would forfeit the title and Gagne would be named champion.

Of course this wasn't said anywhere outside the reaches of the local Minneapolis television show. Gagne had already decided to leave the NWA when the announcement was made, and that was just his angle to explain making himself champion in his local market, and when the AWA started, it was just a promotion that ran in Minnesota and North Dakota.

On August 16, 1960, the 90 days were up. And it was announced that Gagne was the new American Wrestling Association world heavyweight champion. The AWA's first card was that night in Minneapolis, at the Auditorium, before 6,213 fans. Gagne did not defend the title. Instead, in the main event, Tiny Mills & Stan Kowalski, the top heel team in the area known as Murder Incorporated, defended what had been known as the NWA world tag team titles, but were instead called the AWA world tag team champions, against Gagne and another former NCAA champion, Joe Scarpello. It was not a great first night, as the ring broke during the main event and the show had to be stopped. It was a four-match show. The AWA was known for the next two decades for running major cities with fewer matches than most of the other major promotions, but giving the matches more time.

The first record of an actual AWA world title match was also hardly auspicious. It was on a show in Mankato, MN, on September 8, 1960, when Gagne beat Stan Kowalski before 1,025 fans. Gagne's first major program defending the title started in October, with a series of matches against future NWA champion Gene Kiniski, including a November match in St. Paul that drew 10,661 fans. If nothing else, the Gagne vs. Kiniski title program gave the AWA title a bit of business legitimacy, since they were two of the biggest names in the world battling over it.

But past that, outside of Minnesota and North Dakota, the AWA title wasn't taken that seriously at first. The AWA debuted on January 20, 1961, in Winnipeg, where a Whipper Watson vs. Kiniski match drew a standing room only crowd, as did a rematch a month later. With Kiniski as the main star, Winnipeg became the hottest city on the circuit.

Kiniski, billed as the U.S. champion, beat Gagne to win the AWA world title on July 11, 1961 in Minneapolis. Eight days later, Kiniski & Hard Boiled Haggerty beat Leo Nomellini & Snyder to win the tag titles, so Kiniski held three titles at the same time.

This set up a stadium show on August 8, 1961, at Met Stadium, the home of the new Minnesota Twins. Gagne regained the title before 8,055 fans in a cage match when Haggerty scooped up dirt from the field and went to throw it in Gagne's eyes, but he moved and it went into Kiniski's eyes.

Aside from spot shows in small towns in places like South Dakota, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Iowa, the AWA remained a Minnesota/North Dakota and Winnipeg promotion. However, by 1962, Gagne started regularly defending the AWA title in Boston. And The Crusher, who would go on to become the AWA's top draw until the emergence of Hulk

Hogan in 1981, became Gagne's top rival for the title. Their battles with Crusher as the top heel drew the biggest crowds in the AWA of that era. The AWA purchased the rights to Denver from Dory Funk Sr. in 1964. In 1964, they got the Quad Cities hot. Mad Dog Vachon has a long run as champion and as the big rival of Gagne, and after his face turn, had his other big rivalry with Crusher. A few years later, they started in Chicago and Milwaukee, which during the first hot period, became the company's two best markets, built around the now-babyface Crusher.

Largely forgotten is the role the AWA played in the creation of the so-called "big three" world champions, the NWA, AWA and WWWF, from 1968 until the AWA started fading in the mid-80.

It actually started in 1967, as the AWA got television in Los Angeles, and expanded to go into a war with Mike LeBell's established promotion. LeBell's promotion was known as the WWA, and had its own world champion, which was also the recognized champion in Japan. The WWA was really considered one of the big three, given Los Angeles and Tokyo were far more major markets than Minneapolis and St. Paul.

But with the AWA invasion, LeBell contacted the NWA, wanting to join. The idea is that as an NWA member, if a promotion was at war, the other NWA members would help supply them with talent to win the war. But to do that, the NWA member could no longer recognize any other world champion. So in the transition, the WWA world title, at the time held by Bobo Brazil, was dropped, and the NWA title, by that point held by Kiniski, became the main title.

At the same time, the San Francisco office, run by Roy Shire, also joined the NWA. While Gagne had not gotten TV in that market, the feeling is that if Gagne was successful in Los Angeles, San Francisco would be next. San Francisco never used a world champion, but billed its governing body as the AWA, standing for the American Wrestling Alliance, which was Barnett's group out of Indianapolis, which helped launch Shire.

There are tremendous ironies from all this. Later in life, Gagne would have a case of selective recall. He complained when Vince McMahon expanded into his territory in 1984, talking about how promoters had always respected territorial boundaries.

The irony is that Gagne tried and failed in Los Angeles. And while it was 12 years after Shire joined the NWA largely because of needing allies in case Gagne came against him, Gagne actually made a somewhat successful move in 1980. Gagne got television in San Francisco on KTVU. It was 20 years earlier that Shire got television in the market on that same station and used his modern marketing to run established NWA promoter Joe Malciewicz out of business.

Shire's wrestling was a ratings winner for the station, but Shire thought he was untouchable. He'd come to the KTVU studios and spit tobacco juice on their nice carpets. When told to stop, he didn't listen, figuring with the ratings he was drawing, they'd put up with it. Then one day they didn't, and wrestling was canceled. Shire was able to get a new TV outlet and remained successful until the late 70s.

By 1980, Barnett, who started Shire in San Francisco, who for years wasn't allowed to be in the NWA because he was gay, had risen to being one of the key power brokers in the business. Running Georgia Championship Wrestling, which had national television on what was later to become TBS, Barnett was also the Secretary of the NWA. In 1975, he took over for Sam Muchnick in booking the NWA world champion. Shire called up Barnett, asking him to tell Gagne to get his TV off in his territory. Barnett said that he called Gagne, who said No. Shire was furious, but with a nearly non-existent territory, he couldn't fight Gagne, who had access to the two biggest stars Shire ever produced, Ray Stevens & Pat Patterson.

But with the elimination of the WWA title, the AWA was clearly one of the big three belts. By the late 60s, they had moved into Milwaukee, which drew sellouts almost every month built around Crusher, and Chicago, a co-promotion for years between Gagne and Dick the Bruiser until Gagne bought Bruiser out for full control. In the early 70s, AWA

talent was used as the headliners along with local talent and the travelers in Honolulu, which did well at first but the cost of transportation became prohibitive.

The AWA had a strong business peak from 1969 through 1975. Gagne kept himself world champion during that entire period, although he worked only a few dates per month. But with a crew built around Crusher, Wahoo McDaniel, Superstar Billy Graham, Billy Robinson, Dick Murdoch, Dusty Rhodes, Baron Von Raschke, Ivan Koloff, The Vachon Brothers, Larry Hennig, Red Bastien, Don Muraco as well as the team of Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel, they had a great mix of different types of charismatic performers. The Crusher vs. Mad Dog Vachon cage matches after an extremely bloody television angle set records, as did a feud with McDaniel vs. Graham culminating in strap matches. Gagne vs. Robinson was a strong title program, and Bockwinkel & Stevens were the top tag team of that era, drawing with mixed and matched teams of the various different babyfaces, as well as some of the top heels.

Between 1970 and 1985, they ran six stadium shows in Chicago, often with the theme of a Gagne singles match for the title and a Bruiser & Crusher cage matches often for the tag team titles. In 1970, they drew 21,000 fans and a \$148,000 gate, which set the U.S. record at the time, for Bruiser & Crusher vs. Mad Dog & Butcher Vachon in a cage and Gagne defending his title against Von Raschke. In 1972, it was Bruiser & Crusher vs. Blackjacks Lanza & Mulligan in the cage and Gagne defending against Koloff. In 1974, they did 22,000 fans with Gagne vs. Robinson, The Sheik & Bobby Heenan vs. Bruiser & Brazil, and Crusher & Hennig & Ivan Putski vs. Stevens & Bockwinkel & Graham. In 1976, it was Bruiser & Crusher vs. Lanza & Bobby Duncum in a cage, and Bockwinkel vs. Andre the Giant for the AWA title. In 1980, it was Gagne's final title win over Bockwinkel, plus a Battle Royal, Bruiser vs. Jerry Blackwell and Crusher & Mad Dog vs. Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura.

The most loaded show came when they were battling WWF, and on September 28, 1985, drew 21,000 fans paying \$288,000 for a 13-match show that Ric Flair vs. Magnum T.A. for the NWA title, Rick Martel vs. Stan Hansen for the AWA title, Ivan & Nikita Koloff & Krusher Khrushchev vs. Crusher & Bruiser & Von Raschke for the NWA six-man titles, Greg Gagne & Scott Hall & Curt Hennig vs. Stevens & Bockwinkel & Larry Zbyszko, Road Warriors vs. Terry Gordy & Michael Hayes for the AWA tag titles, Jerry Blackwell vs. Kamala in a bodyslam match, Kerry Von Erich vs. Jimmy Garvin for the Texas title, Sherri Martel vs. Candi Divine for the women's title, Steve Regal (not William Regal but a different wrestler) vs. Brad Rheingans for the jr. heavyweight title, Sherri Martel vs. Candi Divine for the women's title, Giant Baba & Jumbo Tsuruta & Genichiro Tenryu vs. Harley Race & Bill & Scott Irwin, Mil Mascaras vs. Buddy Roberts for the IWA title and Sgt. Slaughter vs Boris Zhukov for the Americas title.

Its second boom, which started in 1981, started with the 56-year-old Gagne's retirement from the ring, and followed with the emergence of Hulk Hogan as the top babyface. The AWA was so strong that it built up to averaging 8,000 per show in the Twin Cities if Hogan was in Japan, to nearly 16,000 per show when Hogan was headlining.

While Crusher, the beer drinking, cigar chomping (the irony is that Crusher, who almost always had a cigar in his mouth on television interviews, actually didn't smoke cigars) weightlifter from Milwaukee, was the biggest draw in the territory for nearly 20 years, even at his best, he never approached the numbers during the Hogan run.

Hogan had just come off a WWF run where he was a heel managed by Freddie Blassie, who had big matches with the likes of Andre the Giant, Bob Backlund and Tony Atlas. During that period, Vince McMahon Sr., who had a working agreement with New Japan Pro Wrestling, sent Hogan overseas. At first, he went with Blassie, which gave him instant credibility, because Blassie was a huge draw in Japan during the 1960s and the media gravitated toward him.

But Hogan quickly became popular in Japan, and really that's where the birth of Hulkamania can be traced.

After his WWF run had run its course, Gagne brought him to the AWA as a heel, managed by Luscious Johnny Valiant, who at first did all the

talking for him. But seeing the huge muscle man with the tan and blond hair, the AWA fans went wild for him from the start. Gagne immediately flipped him babyface, ditched Valiant, and did an angle where one of his top heels, Blackwell, was destroying Brad Rheingans, when Hogan jumped in and made the save, bodyslamming the supposed 462 pounder.

Hulkamania was born. Coming out to "Eye of the Tiger," and with interview coaching from Gagne, that became the AWA's golden era. Gagne had retired in 1981, after retaining his title in his final career match over long-time adversary Bockwinkel. Bockwinkel had beaten Gagne for the title in 1975, and Gagne chased it until winning it back in 1980, to set up his retirement match on May 10, 1981, at the St. Paul Civic Center, where he pinned Bockwinkel before 15,780 fans. The evening was filled with area celebrities, including Vikings coach Bud Grant, who was a teammate of Gagne's in college.

Instead of doing a tournament for the vacant title, the belt was given back to Bockwinkel. It made no sense, but that was what Stanley Blackburn, the figurehead AWA President was there for. Blackburn said that to do a tournament, it would take too many months and the company would be without a world champion. In an interview right after the announcement was made, Gagne thought it was ridiculous, noting that every four years, the best wrestlers in the world come to the Olympics, and they decide a champion over the course of a few days. Gagne, frustrated, claimed that if he had known what was going to happen, maybe he wouldn't have retired.

Gagne did another retirement match, on November 21, 1981, in Chicago. He came out of retirement for two more matches in 1982, in St. Paul and Milwaukee, teaming with his biggest 60s rival, Mad Dog Vachon, to beat the tag team of The Sheiks, a now turban clad Sheik Ayatollah Jerry Blackwell & Sheik Adnan Al-Kaissie. He also did some matches in Winnipeg in 1983.

The biggest AWA show of the era was on April 24, 1983, billed as "Super Sunday," a name taken from the Super Bowl nickname. They not only sold out the 18,000 seat St. Paul Civic Center, but drew another 5,000 closed circuit next door for a double main event, where Gagne came out of retirement once again (this was his second coming out of retirement match in the Twin Cities) to team with Vachon to beat The Sheiks, although the big draw was Hogan getting a title shot at Bockwinkel. The total gate was \$300,000, at the time one of the largest ever in North America. They did the gimmick where Hogan threw Bockwinkel over the top rope while the ref was down, but came back to pin Bockwinkel after a legdrop. But Stanley Blackburn overturned the decision and awarded the match to Bockwinkel via DQ. Having the heels lose the title and later having Blackburn overturn the decision for a very legitimate, but frustrating call, had been part of the AWA playbook for years.

Gagne and Hogan had a weird relationship. Gagne was his mentor, yet at the same time, Hogan, with his huge steroided physique and no sports background, never having even played high school football, went against Gagne's beliefs of what a top wrestler should be. Most promoters who became wrestlers that were top stars, like Gagne, Leroy McGuirk, Roy Shire or Bill Watts, liked to promote wrestlers like themselves on top. With Gagne, he always promoted himself as the ultimate top star. Watts went with himself, and later Dick Murdoch, until the rise of Junkyard Dog, but he still always had Jim Duggan and Steve Williams, big, tough football players and amateur wrestlers, as his other kickass babyfaces. Shire, a small heel known for psychology and working, went with Ray Stevens and later Pat Patterson.

But Gagne wasn't out-of-touch when it came to Hogan. As soon as he saw the crowd flip, he went with it immediately. And when it was working, he pushed Hogan as his top star, to the point he even stopped using Crusher during the summer of 1981, to not confuse the issue over who was the top babyface, claiming Blackwell Crusher and forced him to retire, just weeks before the Hogan turn.

Even though Hogan's big money was made in Japan, where he earned \$10,000 per week, and he was not available full-time, it was very clear Hogan was the company's biggest star from the first shows after the turn. He never beat Hogan. Hogan, because of his Japan stardom and

the way the press covered wrestling then, was like Bruiser Brody, Stan Hansen and Andre the Giant, where he wasn't going to lose anyway. But Gagne never pressed the point. During the heyday of Crusher, he very rarely lost and Hogan was booked as the modern version. He didn't need the title to draw, given that he never won the AWA title.

And it is true that once, Gagne, who fashioned himself as a tough guy and Hogan as a non-athletic bloated bodybuilder, did get into a skirmish. Gagne was about 56 years old and Hogan was 29, and Hogan was probably 100 pounds heavier. But Gagne in his fantasy world that he promoted, could still outwrestle everyone when he came out of retirement. Gagne went for a double leg takedown, and Hogan sprawled and was on top. Whether Hogan choked Gagne out with a guillotine, or just held Gagne down until Gagne, his little bit of hair messed up, gave up the ghost, depends on whose version of the story one believes. Still, Gagne loved to tell the story about when he introduced Hogan to Alexander Karelin, the Greco-Roman specialist who was the most dominant super heavyweight wrestler who ever lived. He would joke to people about Hogan shaking hands with a guy who could tear him apart.

Still, Gagne was a promoter and he knew that Hogan was the goose that laid the biggest golden eggs he'd ever had.

And then the world changed again. Vince McMahon was looking to expand, and made an offer to buy out Gagne. Gagne felt the number offered was ridiculous, and besides, the last thing he was looking to do was sell when his promotion was producing more revenue than ever before.

McMahon was ambitious and Hogan was going to be given an offer of far more than he made in the AWA and New Japan, because he was the key to McMahon's goals. Had Hogan been AWA champion, there is no way he'd do the job on the way out. McMahon would have insisted he didn't given the nature of what the business was then. And Hogan wasn't doing jobs for anyone anyway.

Historically, Gagne has always been maligned for being so stupid and out of touch for never making Hogan champion. While the decision can certainly be debated, it's hardly open-and-shut. And while Gagne was clearly out of touch with wrestling when faced with the competition with McMahon, unable or unwilling to up pay and keep top talent, or upgrade his television, his booking of Hogan was an unquestioned success.

For one, Hogan was booked along the lines of Crusher, who did hold the AWA title three times between 1963 and 1965, but never when he really peaked as a draw several years later and when the AWA expanded and became what it was remembered as. Crusher was the biggest draw and top babyface for the next 16 years, never even getting a shot at Gagne. It can be argued Crusher's drawing power diminished when he, over-and-over again, failed to beat Bockwinkel. But there were other circumstances including a less charismatic roster and him being older.

And Gagne was very willing to make Hogan champion, but there was an issue with Japan. Gagne had a business deal with Giant Baba where the AWA champion, and its top talent, would be booked for All Japan Pro Wrestling. Hogan was under contract to New Japan, and All Japan and New Japan were bitter rivals at the time. Still, that wasn't enough for Gagne to not use Hogan as his top star. But he'd risk his lucrative Japanese deal if his world champion worked for the opposition. It was an issue Gagne and Hogan tried to work out, but never could make work.

Additionally, Hogan never stopped drawing big in the AWA. He didn't need the belt to pack houses, and since he wasn't full-time, you still had Bockwinkel defending against other babyfaces so there were two major matches when he was around, or Bockwinkel's defenses being able to headline when Hogan wasn't around. If Hogan's failure to win the title at Super Sunday was a mistake, it would have been reflected in weaker business. If anything, the core AWA cities were still on the upswing on the shows Hogan appeared on.

And while this didn't factor into the decision, it would have been disastrous had he made Hogan champion. Hogan was leaving at the end of 1983 under any circumstances. McMahon had the foresight to

know that if he wanted to go national, Hogan was clearly the guy to build around. Jimmy Snuka was unreliable and old. McMahon felt Bob Backlund, the current champion, wasn't anything like what he wanted. Dusty Rhodes was older, and fat, plus he was booking in the Carolinas but he was exactly the opposite of what McMahon wanted a champion to look like to a new audience. Kerry Von Erich, probably the other most charismatic babyface, who had the look, was also unreliable and weak on interviews, plus his father had a promotion and it would be difficult to get him. And while Von Erich would have been a major national star with the same spotlight, he probably would have self destructed even if he was willing to leave, and even he didn't have the kind of potential that Hogan did.

As bad as it was for Gagne to lose Hogan, and it was a killer that he never recovered from, it would have been worse to lose Hogan's drawing power and have the guy his fan base considered the world champion on McMahon's TV being billed as world champion. Given how wrestling, titles and wins and losses were viewed, it would have crippled the value of the AWA title when they'd have to put it back on Bockwinkel, and everyone knew Hogan had beaten him, never lost, and was on another TV channel as champion.

The AWA did well in 1984 even without Hogan. Crusher was brought back, but he was 57 years old by then and he really wasn't going to work out past being a short-term nostalgia act. But Gagne brought in people like The Road Warriors, Sgt. Slaughter and Bruiser Brody. While he was losing to McMahon, he had a good year, but things deteriorated rapidly.

But McMahon took advantage of the fact that Gagne was hated by much of his talent. A typical Gagne story involved Jesse Ventura, who at the time was one of Gagne's top heels. Ventura & Adrian Adonis, the AWA tag team champions, were feuding with the High Flyers, a team that consisted of Verne's son Greg Gagne, and former University of Minnesota football player Jumping Jim Brunzell. Larry Matysik, who was brought in by Gagne a few times to announce when Rodger Kent, who also hated Gagne, would be unavailable on a taping day. He was there when Ventura got furious, complaining to Verne Gagne when he found out that for the tag team matches, that Greg's pay was significantly higher than the other three. He stormed out. Matysik asked Verne Gagne what he was going to do, and Gagne laughed and said "Nothing. He'll be back in two days."

While a talent like Ventura could have gone elsewhere, Minneapolis was his home, the AWA's schedule was a lot better than most places, and the pay was better than he was going to make anywhere else. A key advantage of working in the AWA is that Gagne kept people around longer than most. Working on top in Madison Square Garden would pay more than Gagne, but the WWF usually went through heels in cycles that may last a year. Gagne would keep guys for many years. Bockwinkel came in 1970 and didn't leave until 1987, at which time the promotion was limping to its death.

While Ventura came back that time, and every other time he was mad about his pay, you can understand that when McMahon contacted Ventura to come in for a run with Hogan as champion, he jumped at the chance. Ventura had his own way of getting revenge on the way out.

Ventura agreed to McMahon's offer and was about to start in a few days like McMahon wanted, with a shocking debut nobody knew about. He came in for AWA interview day, cutting promos all day, for every AWA market for about a month. Just before going in to cut promos, he sent Gagne his resignation letter. So after cutting all his promos, he wasn't going to be making any of the cities.

Some promoters would have just dumped the interviews and changed the advertising. But Gagne had months earlier continued to advertise Hogan for five weeks after he left, drawing big houses everywhere. He did that with everyone that left, whether it be those who went to WWF, or those, like Brody, who just got fed up and quit. The no-shows became comical, and almost a calling card of AWA shows in that era. Once, when Stan Hansen was AWA champion, a title change put together by Giant Baba, Gagne wanted Hansen to drop the title in Denver by Bockwinkel. Hansen was already booked by Baba in Japan to defend the title. That should have all been worked out between Gagne and

Baba. But there was no question where Hansen's loyalties were going to lie. He walked out in Denver as he was asked, with no notice, to lose. The AWA tried to play it up that Hansen was afraid of Bockwinkel, who was given the title by forfeit, but they had to get a new belt. Hansen took the original belt to Japan, did his title defense. He then mailed the belt back to Gagne. Of course, he also, "accidentally," had it on his driveway for some reason, and his truck ran over it, back and forth, several times.

Almost everyone who worked in the AWA wanted to leave and work for Vince McMahon. And McMahon would take anyone.

The wrestling in the AWA wasn't particularly good during the Hogan era, and the TV was worse. It was shot in a TV studio, with a very simple format. Every match would be a squash match. Angles were rare. The announcing wasn't good. However, the interviews, with people like Ventura, Bockwinkel and Bobby Heenan, working with Okerlund, was some of the best in the business. The AWA was also by that point an established part of the community, and they were the only wrestling on television in most of their cities. They were behind the times. But it didn't matter. They were the only game in town.

But when cable hit big, and the WWF got television in their key cities, the AWA TV paled in comparison. Younger fans quickly switched their allegiances to the WWF, since Hogan had been the AWA's big star for the past several years.

The AWA fell hard, but Gagne did stay in the game longer than he would have due to getting a weekly television deal on the fledgling ESPN. ESPN saw that wrestling was drawing big ratings on TBS and USA, and wanted in. They inked a deal with World Class, but it would be to air old shows since World Class was making more money with its shows first-run through national syndication.

It came down to the AWA and Mid South Wrestling. Mid South was producing arguably the best television in the country, and its territory was hot. But the AWA got the nod, largely because ESPN executives knew who Sgt. Slaughter was, and didn't know anyone on the Mid South roster.

The AWA went on for several more years, with crowds dwindling everywhere. Still, they had some of the best young talent in wrestling, most notably Curt Hennig and Shawn Michaels. Bockwinkel and Hennig did a 60 minute draw at a TV taping, which aired on New Year's Eve in 1985 on ESPN and was one of the best matches of that era. While Bockwinkel retained the title, it was the match that really made Hennig, who hit his stride even bigger when he went heel and got the AWA title. Michaels and partner Marty Jannetty had great matches, most notably a television bloodbath, against Buddy Rose & Doug Somers. Paul Heyman first made his national name as Paul E. Dangerously, managing tag team champions Pat Tanaka & Paul Diamond and the Original Midnight Express of Dennis Condrey & Randy Rose.

But soon Gagne gave up the ghost, as he could no longer promote profitable house shows. He survived based on the ESPN deal, and just putting his own money into the promotion. An attempt at PPV built around Jerry Lawler vs. Kerry Von Erich to unify the AWA title (which Lawler had beaten Hennig for) and the World Class title, did poorly and was never tried again. When Gagne ran out of money, and ratings dropped to where ESPN no longer had interest in broadcasting wrestling, the AWA limped to its death in 1991.

VERNE GAGNE CAREER TITLE HISTORY

AWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT: Named first champion August 16, 1960; lost to Gene Kiniski July 11, 1961 Minneapolis; def. Gene Kiniski August 8, 1961 Minneapolis; lost to Mr. M (Bill Miller) January 9, 1962 Minneapolis; def. Mr. M August 21, 1962 Minneapolis; lost to The Crusher July 9, 1963 Minneapolis; def. The Crusher July 20, 1963 Minneapolis; lost to Fritz Von Erich July 27, 1963 Omaha; def. Fritz Von Erich August 8, 1963 Amarillo; lost to The Crusher November 16, 1963 St. Paul; def. The Crusher December 14, 1963 Minneapolis; lost to Mad Dog Vachon May 2, 1964 Omaha; def. Mad Dog Vachon May 16, 1964

Omaha; lost to Mad Dog Vachon October 20, 1964 Minneapolis; def. Mad Dog Vachon February 26, 1967 St. Paul; lost to Dr. X (Dick Beyer) August 17, 1968 Bloomington; def. Dr. X August 31, 1968 Minneapolis; lost to Nick Bockwinkel November 8, 1975 St. Paul; def. Nick Bockwinkel July 18, 1980 Chicago; Retired as champion after beating Nick Bockwinkel May 10, 1981 St. Paul

WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT (Fred Kohler Enterprises):def. Edouard Carpentier August 9, 1958 Omaha; Last billed as champion December 1958

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Predecessor to AWA World Tag Team in the Minnesota area):w/Bronko Nagurski def. Doc & Mike Gallagher December 26, 1957 Minneapolis; lost to Doc & Mike Gallagher March 22, 1958 St. Paul; w/Leo Nomellini def. Doc & Mike Gallagher May 15, 1958 Minneapolis; lost to Doc & Mike Gallagher 1958; w/Butch Levy def. Ivan & Karol Kalmikoff April 28, 1959 Minneapolis; Title vacated when Gagne left the area; w/Leo Nomellini def. Stan Kowalski & Tiny Mills July 19, 1960 Minneapolis; Vacated title when Nomellini returned to the San Francisco 49ers for the 1960 season

AWA WORLD TAG TEAM:w/Moose Evans def. Dick the Bruiser & The Crusher February 9, 1964 Minneapolis; lost to Dick the Bruiser & The Crusher February 23, 1964 St. Paul; w/The Crusher def. Larry Hennig & Harley Race July 24, 1965 Minneapolis; lost to Larry Hennig & Harley Race August 7, 1965 Minneapolis; w/Billy Robinson def. Ray Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel December 30, 1972 Minneapolis; lost to Ray Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel January 6, 1973 St. Paul; w/Mad Dog Vachon def. Ray Stevens & Pat Patterson June 6, 1979 Winnipeg; lost to Stan Hansen & Bobby Duncum August 15, 1979 Winnipeg; w/Mad Dog Vachon def. Stan Hansen & Bobby Duncum; Titles vacated when Gagne missed July 20, 1980 title defense against Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura

IWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT:def. Rusher Kimura November 13, 1979 Niigata; lost to Rusher Kimura November 16, 1979 Wakayama

AWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT (Quebec):def. Killer Kowalski February 25, 1953 Montreal; lost to Killer Kowalski May 6, 1953 Montreal

NWA UNITED STATES TELEVISION: Named first champion September 3, 1953; lost to Wilbur Snyder April 7, 1956 Chicago; def. Dick the Bruiser April 11, 1958 Chicago; lost to Wilbur Snyder November 15, 1958 Omaha

NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE WORLD JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT:def. Sonny Myers in tournament final November 13, 1950 Tulsa; lost to Danny McShain November 19, 1951 Memphis

NATIONAL WRESTLING ASSOCIATION WORLD JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT:def Billy Goetz April 21, 1951 Milwaukee to unify with the National Wrestling Alliance title

BIG TIME WRESTLING WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT:def. Edouard Carpentier August 9, 1958 Omaha; lost to Wilbur Snyder November 15, 1958 Omaha; def. Don Leo Jonathan September 16, 1961 Omaha; lost to Fritz Von Erich July 31, 1962 Omaha; def Fritz Von Erich August 25, 1962 Omaha; lost to The Crusher February 15, 1963 Omaha; def. The Crusher July 20, 1963 Minneapolis; lost to Fritz Von Erich July 27, 1963 Omaha; def. Fritz Von Erich September 7, 1963 Omaha; Title merged into AWA world heavyweight 1963

AWA UNITED STATES HEAVYWEIGHT:def. Dick the Bruiser April 11, 1958 Chicago; lost to Wilbur Snyder November 19, 1960

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Fred Kohler Promotions):w/Wilbur Snyder def. Boris & Niccoli Volkoff May 17, 1957 Chicago; lost to Boris & Niccoli Volkoff October 4, 1957 Chicago

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Midwest):w/Edouard Carpentier def. Boris & Niccoli Volkoff May 25, 1957 Milwaukee; lost to Boris & Niccoli Volkoff June 1957

NWA WORLD TAG TEAM (Texas):w/Wilbur Snyder first champions 1957; lost to Wild Bill Longson & Ike Eakins August 1958

NWA TEXAS HEAVYWEIGHT:def. Sonny Myers in tournament final December 16, 1949 Houston; lost to Danny McShain January 13, 1950 Houston; def. Miguel Blackie Guzman September 8, 1950 Houston; lost to Rito Romero October 27, 1950 Houston

AWA EASTERN STATES:def. Yvon Robert May 5, 1953

1942 - Minnesota high school football All-State team
1943 - Minnesota high school heavyweight state wrestling champion
1944 - Big 9 175 pound champion (No NCAA tournament held that year)
1947 - Big 9 heavyweight champion, 3rd place NCAA tournament
1948 - Big 9 191 pound champion, NCAA champion
1948 - Olympic trials, 2nd place, 191.5 pounds
1949 - Big 9 heavyweight champion, NCAA champion
1949 - AAU national champion, 191 pounds
1949 - Played in College Football All-Star game
Robbinsdale High School Hall of Fame
University of Minnesota Hall of Fame
Minnesota Museum of Broadcasting Hall of Fame
Tragos/Thesz Hall of Fame
Wrestling Observer Hall of Fame
WWE Hall of Fame
Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame
WCW Hall of Fame
Minnesota wrestling lifetime service Hall of Fame
Tokyo Sports Match of the Year 1981 - January 18, 1981 Tokyo vs. Giant Baba AWA vs. PWF double title match

SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

A note on the Verne Gagne title history in last week's issue. The world title in Montreal that Gagne held was never called the AWA title. Paul Bowser, the previous promoter, called his world championship the AWA title. But by the time Gagne won it, Eddie Quinn was the promoter and it was called the world heavyweight title, or sometimes the Montreal Athletic Commission world heavyweight title since 1939 or so.

NICK BOCKWINKEL

Nick Bockwinkel, one of the greatest pro wrestlers of the last 50 years, passed away a few hours ago just shy of his 81st birthday.

Bockwinkel, whose father was noted pro wrestler Warren Bockwinkel, started pro wrestling in the mid-1950s after losing his football career at the University of Oklahoma ended due to a knee injury. He was a star on the West Coast first, and traveled all over the world for 32 years as a headliner.

He was most famous in the AWA. He arrived there around 1970 and quickly became the go-to heavyweight singles heavyweight main eventer, and the main rival of Verne Gagne, the owner and perennial champion, for a decade. He held the AWA title on four occasions, most notably from 1975 to 1980, and again from 1981 to 1984. He was also AWA tag team champion three times, with Ray Stevens, in what was generally considered the best tag team unit of the 70s.

Bockwinkel took the AWA title out of just the Midwest and wrestled all over the country as champion, including places like Houston, San Antonio, Stampede Wrestling and Memphis, where the title became as big or bigger than the NWA title.

Bockwinkel was a pro's pro in every way, a masterful worker, great promo, who carried himself like a champion at all times, even well into his 50s. Bockwinkel was just of his 52nd birthday when he had his 60

minute draw with Curt Hennig on ESPN that was one of the best matches of the 80s.

On a personal level, Nick was one of the great teachers and philosophers in this business and the amount that I learned from him can never be put into words. It was very sad the past year when this brilliant performer was battling memory issues and hearing about his last public appearance at the Cauliflower Alley Club this past year. Bockwinkel was the longtime President of the Club before giving up his duties due to health issues over the past year.

There were few men in modern pro wrestling who had the amount of respect among their peers as Nick Bockwinkel, who passed away on 11/14 at the age of 80.

Perhaps the best example was seven months ago, in what was his last public appearance, on 4/14. Bockwinkel was at the Cauliflower Alley Club's Baloney Blowout. In a cruel twist of fate, Bockwinkel, the man noted for his great mind and verbal ability, fell victim to issues far too familiar to older wrestlers and contract sports athletes, with their memories and what made them tick taken away from them.

It had been kept quiet that Bockwinkel was having issues, until Ric Flair mentioned it. His friends had talked about it for years, and were heartbroken about it. I can sympathize, because my last conversation with Bockwinkel, a few years ago, was almost identical to my last conversation with Red Bastien, who faced similar issues the last several years of his life. Without going into detail, he would tell me a story, and then, less than five minutes later, tell me the same story. When someone you learned so much from is like that, it was really heartbreaking, and even more so when it was someone who throughout his life was known for his intelligence and his ability to teach.

At the Cauliflower Alley banquet, I was told that Bockwinkel didn't even recognize a lot of his friends, although one person noted he was asking about his friend Patrick Patterson the first day. On the second day, at the Baloney Blowout, Brian Blair, who had replaced Bockwinkel as the figurehead President of the Club, announced that forever more, the Tuesday night event will be called the Nick Bockwinkel Baloney Blowout. As Bockwinkel was leaving, Blair asked everyone in the room, filled with his contemporaries, many of the most ardent fans, and many younger wrestlers, to give him "one last standing ovation." The description to me is that seeing everyone look at him, stand up and give him a big reaction was something he could no longer understand completely. He bowed his head and tears rolled down his face. He and wife Darlene left the room. Most in the room realized it was the last time they would ever see him as he wasn't going to be attending the banquet the next night, and the word was out this was going to be his last public appearance.

His friends said he was suffering from Alzheimer's, something his family denied and was furious had gotten out. Bockwinkel was a proud man with a great reputation and his family, and those at the Cauliflower Alley Club, were unhappy at Ric Flair, who had great reverence for Bockwinkel and who noted how much he helped him when he was a rookie, and later myself, for mentioning his issues.

Mick Karch, who in the 70s was the President of the "Worldwide Bockwinkel Brigade," considered the top fan club for any pro wrestler of that era, was there.

Karch had slowly over the years won Bockwinkel's trust, after agreeing to allow him to run his fan club, and then telling him that he'd give him little or if any time or cooperation with it. He ended up giving him more time and cooperation than almost any wrestler of the era did to their fan club. Then, some 15 years later, after seeing tapes of Karch announcing for Tony Condello in Winnipeg, suggested to Verne Gagne to hire Karch, who then became an AWA announcer and interviewer.

He also recognized this was probably the last time he'd ever see Bockwinkel.

"It was so surreal to me," wrote Karch in an article for Slam Wrestling. "So much history between us, my mentor, my friend, was riding off into the sunset.

Bockwinkel was sitting down with his wife, Darlene, and Karch came up to him and said, "I love ya, Bockwinkel. You know that, don't you?" Bockwinkel said, "You do, huh?"

"I felt a lump in my throat and said, 'Damn right.' With that, Nick started to cry, which promoted me to do the same. I looked at him and said, 'Nick, I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't have any of this, if it wasn't for you.' We shook hands and I went on my way, leaving him to bask in the glow of the adoration he was receiving from everyone."

Most will remember Bockwinkel with the huge gaudy belt, the "giant license plate," as he would sometimes jokingly refer to it, in his words, "emblematic of being the best wrestler in the world." He was a four-time AWA champion, the dominant champion from 1975 through 1987, and the most widely traveled champion in the history of what was considered during that period as one of the big three titles in North America.

But he had a sense of humor about it. In the business, through at least the end of 1983, most considered the NWA championship as the leading belt in the industry. Bruno Sammartino was the biggest drawing card in wrestling during his heyday and the WWWF title he and Bob Backlund dominated covered the Northeast, including the most populous cities and Madison Square Garden, the NWA belt was recognized in far more places. Bockwinkel's AWA title belt was the king in the Midwest, where he, like Verne Gagne, The Crusher, Baron Von Raschke and others, were symbols of a golden era, household cultural names, for people who grew up in cities from Chicago to Denver, Winnipeg to Omaha, and most points in between.

Bockwinkel, as champion, wrestled at times in a number of NWA and unaffiliated territories as champion, including strong wrestling markets like Houston, San Antonio, Tennessee and in Alberta, where his title supplanted the formerly recognized NWA belt as the key title the local stars would chase. Many would consider the Bockwinkel & Bobby Heenan duo as champion and manager to be the best all-around package of its type in at the time, and arguably ever, as far as a top star/manager combination. The closest modern comparison would be the heel C.M. Punk's long title reign with Paul Heyman as manager. Punk, like Bockwinkel, was a great talker on his own, and one could argue didn't need a manager. But the manager made the championship act that much more effective. The Punk/Heyman act was together only a short time, while Bockwinkel and Heenan were together, on-and-off, for a decade.

During that era, in Japan, Ribera steakhouse, a small hole-in-the-wall place in Tokyo was a hangout of wrestlers, made famous by the Ribera jackets that the biggest stars would wear in public. The place featured autographed photos of the biggest stars as they ate there. Harley Race, Bockwinkel's contemporary as NWA champion, signed his photo, "Harley Race, six-time REAL world champion," with the idea that the NWA always pushed that there were other champions, but the NWA belt was the real one, claiming its history dated back to the Gotch-Hackenschmidt days.

The National Wrestling Alliance was actually the name of a regional world title in the 40s, which became the major worldwide alliance of promoters from a meeting in 1948, the top organization as it grew in popularity by 1949, and created the closest thing to a worldwide recognized world champion within a few years due to the booking and political savvy of President Sam Muchnick and the respect of perennial champion Lou Thesz. Muchnick had commissioned a history, not completely accurate, but not far from accurate, tracing an NWA world title lineage to those famous matches.

Bockwinkel, in autographing a photo and seeing what Race wrote, signed his, "Nick Bockwinkel, three-time semi-real world heavyweight champion."

"He was one of the brightest guys, in or out of the business, that I ever met," said Ring of Honor Vice President of Operations Gary Juster,

who grew up in the Twin Cities as a fan watching Bockwinkel. It was Bockwinkel who was responsible for getting him into what was a very closed business in that era. "He was incredibly classy, up on world events, super quick witted. He mentored me and introduced me to Verne Gagne, and really is responsible for me getting my start in the business."

He was a star everywhere he worked for virtually the entirety of his full-time career, which ended with his 1987 retirement, at the age of 52. He could see the AWA was on its last legs, and he got an offer to come to WWF. They wanted him as a road agent and not a wrestler, even though he was still better than the vast majority of the wrestlers on the WWF roster at the time. For a promotion building around youth and steroid bodies, Bockwinkel would have been a fish out of water, and wasn't going to get a push even if they did want him to wrestle.

But times had changed. In the pre-1984 era, Bockwinkel, the veteran great worker and one of the three major champions of the business, was as highly respected as anyone. His goal was to always have a good match. He had a high opinion of his talents, deservedly so, even though he would always talk of his long-time partner, Ray Stevens, with reverence. He often would say that if Stevens was hung over from an all-night binge, and he was at his best, on those days, he was close to as good as Stevens.

His talent was creating dramatic matches with character babyfaces, most notably Crusher, or older wrestlers in the 80s like Mad Dog Vachon, Baron Von Raschke, and even Billy Robinson, as well as being the favorite opponent of Verne Gagne, the territory's owner.

When Crusher passed away, he noted, with no attempt at false modesty, that when people would talk with him about the great sellout matches at the Amphitheater in Chicago with he and Stevens against Bruiser & Crusher, he said, "I'll take all the credit for those matches with Ray Stevens, because we deserved it."

He worked 17 straight years as a main event heel in the same territory, and was effective in that role until the promotion fell apart, never getting stale. Jerry Lawler, who worked with all the great champions of the era, had his best title matches with Bockwinkel and always called him the best world champion he ever faced. Unlike most top performers, there was no Nick Bockwinkel style match or patterned sequences of moves. He used a piledriver as a finish early, but in his world title run, he often used the figure four.

Philosophically, he was similar to Bret Hart, in the sense he was about making a match exciting, heavily relying on psychology and storytelling, while not wanting to get hurt in doing so. But he was far less patterned. That philosophy led to his longevity at the top, as he avoided the crippling injuries and was still working at the top level into his 50s. In particular, he wasn't fond of working with Wahoo McDaniel, one of the top stars of the era, because he didn't enjoy taking the hard chops. The idea was to make everything believable, lay stuff in, but without risking unnecessary injury to himself or his opponent.

"I knew how to wrestle a little bit, but I was not a Danny Hodge in any capacity," he said in the book "The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels," that named him one of the greatest heels of all-time. "I worked hard. I worked enthusiastically. I didn't want anyone to see any holes in my work. By that, I meant the guy at ringside, the 10th row of ringside, the 15th row of ringside. So I laid them in. Now, I didn't lay them in with the knuckles as much as the whole forearm. If you can't take the pounding, then God almighty, it's not a sewing circle."

But he was the conductor, and felt strongly about what that role meant. As the world champion heel, he controlled the workings of his matches, and he grew frustrated with guys who wouldn't listen to his veteran advice, or guys who worked a dominating style and didn't show respect for his standing and didn't give him offense befitting his standing, pointing out names like Bruiser Brody, Stan Hansen and the Road Warriors.

When the younger bodybuilders took over from the old school wrestlers in the mid-80s, in his interviews, he would note how he and Stevens never wore scary costumes nor painted their faces, but had

been main eventers for 30 years, "So think how good we must be." He would joke, "What do you call a bodybuilder with mirrors on four sides?" The answer, was, "A prisoner."

I can recall being at a show at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in the mid-80s San Francisco, where Bockwinkel was the challenger in an AWA title match against Rick Martel. They were going about 35 minutes so started slow. Bockwinkel held Martel in a long headlock and fans were chanting "Boring." Most wrestlers would have taken that as a cue to get up and do a high spot. Bockwinkel took the opposite approach. He told me that the conductor at the symphony isn't told by the audience what to do. He held Martel in a headlock even longer, and yelled at those who were chanting, saying, "Rick, you're boring your fans."

Bockwinkel's first match with Gagne's AWA may have been in 1962 (he had matches in Jim Barnett's AWA, the American Wrestling Alliance as opposed to Gagne's American Wrestling Association years earlier), coming in as the tag team partner of local star Tiny Mills in a tournament for the vacant AWA tag titles (Otto Von Krupp, who was later better known as Professor Boris Malenko, who held the titles with partner Bob Geigel, was injured). As the outsider, his team lost in the first round.

But the most famous part of Bockwinkel's career started in late 1970, when he returned to the AWA, and got over so strong as a heel, that it remained his home base until the end of his career.

His first heel run started shortly before his AWA debut. He was wrestling in Georgia as a babyface, holding the Georgia heavyweight title. When world champion Dory Funk Jr., would come to town, Bockwinkel got regular shots at him, always coming up short. The frustration at being unable to beat Funk Jr. led to a slow heel turn.

Bockwinkel traced the turn to one interview.

"I said, 'Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, page 1,348, the far right column, the 36th word down is 'Funk.' F-U-N-K. Definition—to retreat in terror, to be afraid, to be not confident.' I slammed the other half of the book closed. I said, 'Thank you,' and I walked off. The TV station said they got more response, the office got more response, just out of that little tidbit."

Funk Jr., who was NWA champion from 1969 to 1973, said that he rated Bockwinkel at the top of the list of his challengers, right along with Jack Brisco, Harley Race, Johnny Valentine and McDaniel.

When he arrived in the AWA, he had somewhat long, thick, blond hair. Bockwinkel had a natural arrogance and billed himself as being a rich sports star who lived in Beverly Hills, CA, with the idea he ran in the same social circles as the A-listers of the era. He would refer to the wrestling fans as "cretinous humanoids," (Bobby Heenan calling fans humanoids came from copying Bockwinkel) and "8 to 5 lifers."

He had done some acting, usually working as a bad guy heavy when they wanted a big guy with a good physique and that was also good looking. He had a small role in an episode of "The Monkees" TV show, and, while living in Hawaii, was on the original "Hawaii Five-O," television show a few times. He wasn't a workout fanatic or a steroid guy, but was blessed with good genetics and structure, able to carry about 240 pounds on a 6-foot-1 frame and have a very fit athletic looking body. Between maintaining a tan and his genetics, the body allowed him to look years younger than he was, particularly in a period when steroid use wasn't so prevalent so people's views of an athletic physique hadn't been as warped.

His few acting credits in wrestling in those days was parlayed into the idea he was a Hollywood TV star, which played well to fans in the Midwest where those type of people were outsiders in their more rugged cultural of living in a far more brutal climate. During his entire AWA run, they would pretend he lived in Beverly Hills, not Minneapolis, and commuted to the area, while bragging about how much better things were, from the weather to the women, where he lived.

"The Lean Mean Machine, Tricky Nicky Bockwinkel," quickly became the leading singles rival of Verne Gagne, the Minnesota sports hero and Midwest wrestling legendary world champion. The contrast also worked with the California pretty boy going against the street fighting legend, the cigar chomping and beer-drinking Crusher from Milwaukee.

When Gagne brought in Ray Stevens several months later, billed from San Francisco, where Stevens was the wrestling legend, he paired the two of them up. They quickly defeated Bastien & Crusher for the AWA world tag team championship on January 20, 1972, in Denver. With a few brief interruptions, they held those titles until August 16, 1975, losing to Crusher & Dick the Bruiser, in Chicago.

Because Gagne only wrestled sparingly, maybe 15 to 20 title defenses a year, the house show business was largely built around the tag team championship. The two were considered the premier tag team in the business during that era, and also worked outside the AWA in places like Florida and Texas. The Bockwinkel & Stevens era as champions, working against various combinations of babyfaces like Crusher, Bastien, Billy Robinson, Don Muraco, McDaniel, Dr. X (Dick Beyer), Gagne, Bruiser and Ken Patera, was the AWA's best drawing era until the Hulk Hogan era in the early 80s. At first the team went solo, but later added Heenan to the package as manager.

Teaming with Stevens was one of Bockwinkel's career highlights. He noted that he worked in San Francisco in the early 60s when Stevens set the area on fire and was regarded as the Ric Flair or Shawn Michaels of his era. He would talk about how he and Wilbur Snyder were the world tag team champions working underneath the Stevens vs. Pepper Gomez U.S. title feud, the biggest in the history of the area. Stevens to him was the gold standard. Whenever he would praise someone in the ring as being one of the best, the term was, "He was almost as talented as Ray Stevens." Gomez was another personal favorite. He noted to me when Gomez passed away that, "I named my dog 'Pepper,' and that is the highest honor in my household."

The two were among the greatest and most successful tag teams of all-time. Both specialized in making their opponents look good, but had the ability to always stay over. It helped that they usually cheated to win, with the favorite finish being Stevens doing the Bombs Away, a kneedrop off the top rope, a move illegal in the AWA, behind the referee's back.

The two were a contrast with the erudite Bockwinkel, who exuded class, dressed well and used big words in his promos like a college professor, and Stevens, gruff, who was like the kid in high school who was constantly in detention for looking up girls skirts.

Some of their best work came on promos when they would do shots in Honolulu, where Bockwinkel, who had previously been a top babyface when he was a regular on the islands, would speak eloquently, and then Stevens would look at Lord James Blears, a British transplant who booked the promotion and hosted the television show, and close the interview saying, "There's only two good things that ever came out of England, and Elizabeth Taylor's got both of them."

Bockwinkel's interviews came because he had a little notebook, and whenever he'd read a multi-syllable word he didn't know, he would go to the dictionary, and put the meaning in his notebook, and figure a way to work it into his promos.

"I used the four, five or six syllable words as best I could," said Bockwinkel.

He'd study 70 or 80 words in his notebook and when he would do his interviews, which were usually off the top of his head, the words would come naturally to him.

Flair was breaking into wrestling in late 1972, and while he palled around with Superstar Billy Graham, and was enamored with Stevens and Dusty Rhodes, he had great respect for Bockwinkel.

"Nick was one of the greatest guys I ever met in my life," said Flair. "He wasn't Ray Stevens or Dusty Rhodes, but he was a great promo. He

was the modern day Buddy Rogers, dressed like a star, great technician,, really nice guy. I wasn't mesmerized by him like I was with Ray and Dusty, but every day he would call me aside to give me advice. He meant a lot to me. He became a great friend. He was a great wrestler, a great champion and a great representative of our business. 8-to-5 humanoid lifers, what a great promo back then."

Even though Flair started his career in the AWA, he was a prelim wrestler and Bockwinkel was a headliner. The two may have only wrestled once in singles, on January 16, 1986, in Winnipeg, going to a long double count out in a very good, but not a blow away match. It's funny because people who grew up in the city, and even those in the match like Flair, often recalled it as a title vs. title match. But the match was held when Bockwinkel wasn't AWA champion and only Flair's title was at stake, which was highly unusual since the NWA title was never defended in Winnipeg otherwise. Many in the city also remembered it as a 60 minute draw, which it also wasn't. Because of who was involved, many also remember it as the best match of the era at the Winnipeg Arena, whether it was or wasn't.

Chris Jericho grew up in Winnipeg during that period, when a huge percentage of people in the city would watch the AWA television show and then Hockey Night in Canada. While the story goes around that Jericho was in the front row of the Flair vs. Bockwinkel match, he said that wasn't the case. The well dressed and well-spoken heel that Chris Jericho reinvented himself as in 2007 for his first comeback after a multi-year sabbatical, and led to the best run of his career, was from a combination of characters, but much of it, particularly the way he dressed, the hair and the promo style, was taken from the heel champion character that Bockwinkel played.

"So when I had the idea to turn heel in 2007, because I felt I was very stagnant as a babyface, I based it around two things," said Jericho. "One was a character in the movie, 'No Country for Old Men,' a straight forward no-nonsense serial killer who talked very slowly and very deliberately, and the other was Nick Bockwinkel.

"The WWE had just put out the AWA DVD and I watched it and remembered how great Nick Bockwinkel was. I started wearing the suits that nobody was wearing at the time, and also took his delivery on promos, not yelling, not screaming, very matter-of-fact, very intelligent, using those big words, talking over people's heads. I remember watching as a kid, I didn't like him, because he was a heel, but one of the reasons was he talked over everyone's head and he was holier than thou. When I talked to him in Las Vegas, he said, 'Big words equals heat. Use big words that people don't understand and it will piss people off because they'll know you're smarter than them and nobody wants to be reminded people are smarter than them. Nobody likes to feel stupid.' So that's where I got the basis of the character. A lot of it was Bockwinkel for his use of those big, big words."

The title loss was to move the focus of the promotion from the tag team title to the AWA title, with Bockwinkel as champion. He defeated Verne Gagne on November 8, 1975, in St. Paul. The win, to those in the Midwest, was a total shock, as Gagne had held the title since beating Mad Dog Vachon on February 26, 1967. There was a two week title reign in 1968 by Dr. X, Dick Beyer, in the Twin Cities, but the rest of the territory never knew about it, so to most fans, Gagne had been champion for eight years and eight months straight, and had beaten Bockwinkel numerous times in every city over the previous five years.

That was part of the psychology, because Bockwinkel was the perfect opponent for Gagne to chase, and the promotion was always about placating Gagne's ego. Since Gagne didn't work full-time, the storyline was that Bockwinkel was refusing to give him title matches. The fans all knew that when Gagne was champion, he beat Bockwinkel numerous times, and that Bockwinkel knew it as well. So when Gagne would get a rare title shot, people thought he'd get it back since they were so used to Gagne always being the world champion. But Bockwinkel, for years, would always escape with some sort of technicality. And he was able to make the aging Gagne look like he was the same Gagne that everyone remembered even though by this time Gagne and Crusher were both in their 50s. In addition, he had the ability to make Greg Gagne, Verne's son, look like a potential world champion when they worked together.

During this period, Bockwinkel once even retained his title doing what may have been Andre the Giant's only 60 minute draw, which he admitted was not one of his better matches, but he didn't think anyone else ever did that with Andre.

As far as the portrayal of a world champion, Bockwinkel, was one of the classic champions of modern times. While champion, he was approached by Jack Adkisson (Fritz Von Erich) and asked if he was interested in becoming the NWA champion.

The NWA title in that era made you viewed by many as the biggest star in pro wrestling, and with the exception of Andre the Giant and Bruno Sammartino, would have made him the highest paid wrestler in North America. Virtually everyone in the business wanted the title. It gave you a worldwide legacy, and even after losing, just having held it once in your career made you a star in most parts of North America as well as Japan.

Bockwinkel told me he considered it, but then thought that he was making about \$150,000 a year, which was very good money in the 70s, and working about 180 dates, while based in one territory. He also had a relaxed summer schedule since the AWA cut down on dates during the warm weather with the idea those in the Midwest would take vacations, plus Crusher would routinely invent a problem with Gagne just before the summer would start, have a fight, and quit, taking the entire season off, before calling to make up when the weather would start to get cold. Bockwinkel said he didn't know, but he figured that Race, the NWA champion, was making about \$350,000 a year working more than 300 dates (and his estimate of Race's pay may have been high), and felt it just wasn't worth it.

Bockwinkel was very strong in thinking business. He was part of the AWA's booking meetings from the mid-70s until leaving the organization. In the early 80s, figuring his active career was coming to a close, he bought a percentage of the Houston office from Paul Boesch. Boesch had become disenchanted with the NWA after Race had no-showed two dates for him. To illustrate just how much Boesch hated no-shows, the two matches Race missed as champion were four years apart, one in 1977 and the other in 1981. The second one caused Boesch to recognize Bockwinkel as his world champion. Bockwinkel faced a steady stream of the top babyfaces of the era that Boesch would bring into town, different foes than he'd meet in the AWA, like Bruiser Brody, Dusty Rhodes, Junkyard Dog, Tommy Rich, Tony Atlas, Mil Mascaras, Chavo Guerrero and others.

As a part-owner, Bockwinkel made sure to appear regularly in Houston. Boesch was one of the best paying promoters, and as part owner, if he could help draw a big house, it meant a double payoff. His idea was that when his career was over, he'd move to Houston and eventually, when Boesch retired, take over the promotion.

But wrestling changed and the regional office concept was gone by the time Bockwinkel retired. Instead, after his time as a road agent in WWF was over, he instead became an insurance salesman and financial planner. He eventually moved from Minnesota to Las Vegas in 1999, where he spent a lot of time on the golf course. He also had a short run as the figurehead commissioner of WCW in 1994. The idea sounded good on paper, as Bockwinkel had the credibility of being a legendary performer, and talking was his strong point, but it wasn't a good mix, and didn't last very long. He also helped promote some WCW shows when they came to the Twin Cities.

But as much as he did think business, he also thought lifestyle. He had told me that his favorite period of his career was not when he was one of the biggest names in the business in the 70s and 80s, but when he was a major star in Hawaii during the 60s.

He noted that people all over the world would work hard all year and save up money so they could take their families to Hawaii for a week or two. He, on the other hand, had an apartment across the street from Waikiki Beach, was working three shows a week, which meant he could go to the gym every morning, hang out at the beach every day while his kids were in school, and be home with his family several nights. And when he did work, they were either short drives, or short flights to the other islands. The money wasn't big, but it was enough to

live on. He noted that his kids (two girls, Johnna, born 1958, and Nikki, born 1961) got to live and spend months at a time, year-after-year, on separate occasions living in Hawaii when they were young, and they had great childhood memories of the period. He called the period one of the highlights of his life, saying it was like a long vacation, and when it was over, it cost him no money.

Hawaii was almost his regular territory for most of the 60s, living there from April through August of 1962, from April through September of 1963, from September 1964 through May 1965, from January through October in 1966, from March through December of 1967, from October 1968 to May 1969 and for the month of November of 1970, before his start in the AWA.

Bockwinkel's first title reign ended on July 18, 1980, when he lost to a 54-year-old Gagne. It was a pure vanity move. Gagne was the perennial top contender during Bockwinkel's title run. In a territory built around the very limited Crusher as its top draw, having a top heel with the ability to make limited performers look good was a must, and that was the key to Bockwinkel's long run on top.

Gagne planned on retiring with a big show the next year, and wanted one last title run. Gagne's original retirement match was May 9, 1981, before 15,780 fans at the St. Paul Civic Center, where he pinned Bockwinkel. But then in a shock, on television, AWA figurehead president Stanley Blackburn announced that with Gagne vacating the title by retiring, that it would take months to do a tournament involving the top contenders around the world, so he was instead awarding the title to the No. 1 contender, Bockwinkel. It made no sense of course. The irony is that the decision was made by Gagne, the promoter. But Gagne, the television performer, who would try and keep sports credibility in his crazy world, was furious. He noted that the Olympics involves wrestlers from all over the world and they can get a tournament done in a few days, and, leaving the door open for a comeback, strongly hinted that if he knew the title would be given to Bockwinkel, he may not have retired.

Ironically, it was this next run that was the most financially successful. Largely due to the emergence of Hogan as pro wrestling's biggest drawing card, the AWA caught fire. While Hogan was the big draw, the main events usually featured Bockwinkel, with Heenan by his side, defending the title, often against older babyfaces and making them look young again.

In a move that came out of left field, even though business was on fire, Gagne basically sold the AWA title for a short run to Otto Wanz, the top star in Germany and Australia. Wanz, who was an unknown in the U.S., came in with a push and shocked everyone pinning Bockwinkel on August 29, 1982, at the St. Paul Civic Center.

Few know the story, but this match started a chasm between Bockwinkel and Heenan behind-the-scenes. Bockwinkel clued nobody, not even Heenan, in that he was dropping the title. Heenan felt, and deservedly so, after such a long affiliation with Bockwinkel and Gagne, that, being at ringside, he deserved to have been clued in on that finish. While not enemies, for years Heenan would bring that up when the subject of Bockwinkel came up. For his part, Bockwinkel would never say a bad word about Heenan. He always praised him, calling him "Sir Robert," in reverence because he was so good at what he did he should be knighted. He also praised Heenan as an underrated wrestler, noting that if for some reason he or Stevens had to miss a show when they were carrying the territory as a tag team, that they could put Heenan in as a replacement and not miss a beat.

Bockwinkel regained the title on October 9, 1982, in Chicago. Wanz was then able to return home, and claim he went to the U.S. and won one of their major world titles, to give him credibility back home as not just a local star, but a worldwide star.

With Hogan as the top draw, there was the argument that he should have gotten the title. The reality is business was great the way it was. Bockwinkel would wrestle Hogan on occasion, always ending in a DQ finish because Hogan wasn't going to do a 60 minute match, nor did Gagne ever suggest Hogan lose. It was difficult because some kind of a match with a finality stipulation, like a no DQ match, Texas death

match or cage match, with Hogan, would have drawn the biggest gates possible, but they were impossible to book.

It turned out to be for the best it didn't happen, although historically, things would have long-term ended up no differently. Had Hogan won the title and beaten Bockwinkel, he would have left a few months later for the WWF without doing a job and as the real world champion to every fan in the Midwest. Bockwinkel, even at 49, was the best person Gagne would have had as champion and he at least could claim that Hogan had many shots at him and never won. While going back to him as a default champion when Gagne retired worked out fine, that was because Gagne wasn't the top star working for the opposition.

Still, Gagne didn't know what was coming at the time. Gagne had reservations about giving the title to Hogan, in the sense he didn't need it. Hogan was booked similarly to Crusher, and Gagne hadn't put the title on Crusher since 1965, and never long-term. The difference is, Gagne booked Crusher to lose very rarely, usually to build up a big gate for a return. He never booked Hogan to lose because with Hogan, no revenge for a loss had been needed before he left. Plus, Hogan's main money was not in the AWA, but in Japan, and New Japan would have not wanted Hogan to lose to anyone if he wasn't going to lose to Antonio Inoki again (Inoki beat Hogan early on, but once Hogan became a big star in the AWA, Inoki never pinned him or beat him via submission).

There was also a political issue. Gagne had a deal with Giant Baba to where the AWA champion would work for All Japan Pro Wrestling. Hogan had a deal with rival New Japan, starting when Vince McMahon Sr. booked him when Hogan was still working for WWF during his first run with the company as a heel managed by Fred Blassie. Gagne tried to get Hogan to switch sides and give him the title, but New Japan was Hogan's big money at the time, as he was a far bigger star in Japan than in the U.S. Plus, if the belt was on Hogan, he'd be gone for long periods of time in Japan. With Bockwinkel, they could have title matches on every show, although the AWA flourished in the 70s with rare singles world title matches.

The biggest show ever in the Twin Cities, at least until WrestleMania goes there, "Super Sunday," took place on April 24, 1983, with a double main event of Bockwinkel vs. Hogan for the title, and a grudge match with Verne Gagne coming out of retirement to team with Mad Dog Vachon against Sheik Ayatollah Jerry Blackwell & Sheik Adnan Al-Kaissie. They sold out the 18,000-seat Civic Center well in advance, and opened up the St. Paul Auditorium for closed circuit, drawing another 5,200. They did the Dusty finish, years before it got that nickname. There was a referee bump and while the ref was down, Hogan flipped Bockwinkel over the top rope. Hogan then pinned Bockwinkel with a legdrop after the ref recovered, and Hogan was awarded the title. However, Blackburn reversed the decision, noting that at the point Hogan threw Bockwinkel over the top, it should have been a disqualification.

Hogan had so much momentum that fans were furious. But if anything, making Hogan the uncrowned champion made him stronger. At some point, a decision would have had to have been made, and the Japan issue made it touchy. But Hogan left well before that point.

Gagne sold another short-term title change, this time to All Japan. Baba had bought a few one-week title runs from the NWA for himself. Knowing his days as the top star in the promotion were over, Baba purchased a run for Jumbo Tsuruta, his heir apparent as the top star. Tsuruta beat Bockwinkel on February 22, 1984, in Tokyo, in a match at Budokan Hall in Tokyo, with Terry Funk as referee, in a match where Tsuruta also put up his International title.

Tsuruta, unlike Baba and Antonio Inoki, when they won the U.S. world titles, actually toured the U.S. as champion, with the idea it gave his standing as a world champion more credibility in Japan. He worked all the major AWA cities, before losing to Rick Martel on April 13, 1984. It was sad later in life when honoring Martel, a frequent opponent, at Cauliflower Alley and in other places when the subject of Martel would come up, Bockwinkel would talk of how proud he was to drop the title to Martel.

Martel and Bockwinkel headlined in numerous title matches during this period. Once, in Memphis, they actually had Bockwinkel come in as AWA champion, even though Martel was the champion, to defend against Jerry Lawler, since a few years earlier the Lawler vs. Bockwinkel program was so strong, and they felt Martel wouldn't be as effective as Bockwinkel as an opponent for Lawler.

In fact, Lawler sort of won the title himself. On December 27, 1982, Lawler beat Bockwinkel, but Bockwinkel got his foot on the ropes and the referee counted to three. Lawler was announced as the new champion, and they had the celebration. This was only acknowledged in Memphis and the territory, and I believe they later ruled that the title was held up pending the rematch two weeks later.

During the interim week, on January 3, Lawler destroyed Jimmy Hart so badly in a match that Hart was said to be injured so badly, he was going to be hospitalized all week. In a booking masterpiece, Hart still vowed to be in Bockwinkel's corner the next Monday for revenge to make sure Lawler didn't get the title.

On that night, Hart appeared to be in Bockwinkel's corner (even though this was before Bobby Heenan left for the WWF, Jerry Jarrett wasn't bringing Heenan in with Bockwinkel) wrapped up with bandages from head-to-toe. Just as Lawler appeared to be on the verge of winning, the real Jimmy Hart ran to the ring and distracted him. Lawler and the crowd were stunned, Bockwinkel snuck up and got the pin, and the man wrapped up in the bandages revealed himself to be Andy Kaufman.

Bockwinkel finally turned babyface in the AWA, and on June 29, 1986, was scheduled to win the title in Denver from Stan Hansen. Hansen, a regular with All Japan, was caught in a political problem. He had a title defense scheduled for Japan against Tsuruta several weeks later. Baba once again played a part in getting Hansen, his top foreign star, the AWA belt. Tensions between Gagne and Hansen were high, and there was fear that Hansen, who almost never did jobs in those days, wouldn't lose the title. He wasn't told ahead of time about dropping it in Denver, but did have a sense something was going to happen. He showed up, found out he was supposed to lose that night, and walked out, taking the belt with him.

This was the end of the oversized license plate belt that Gagne and Bockwinkel had made famous, as Hansen ran over it with his truck before mailing it back in tatters, after he'd gone to Japan and defended it against Tsuruta.

So once again, Bockwinkel was champion without having beaten the champion. He tried his best, claiming that Hansen knew he was cornered and turned tail and ran out of the building in Denver. Since Bockwinkel was a babyface, fans were happy he was champion, but by this time the AWA was struggling badly. It was during this reign that Bockwinkel had his 60 minute draw on ESPN against Hennig, which was taped in Las Vegas in November, but aired on New Year's Eve.

His final title run ended unexpectedly. At the Cow Palace in San Francisco, at Superclash, Curt Hennig pinned Bockwinkel on May 2, 1987, due to outside interference from Larry Zbyszko, who handed Hennig Brass Knux and he knocked out Bockwinkel for the pin. It was a changing of the guard in many ways. Stevens was in Bockwinkel's corner, and told the referee what happened. Even though Stevens was the all-time legend of Cow Palace wrestling and Bockwinkel was the babyface, the fans had completely changed by this point. They wanted to see a title change and booed Stevens for telling the ref about the interference and foreign object. The idea was to return the title to Bockwinkel. However, Hennig got an offer from WWF and was ready to go. When he told Gagne, Gagne wanted him to stay so badly he offered him the title, and Hennig accepted, which delayed his going to WWF. So the man who had been handed the belt over-and-over, lost it for the final time in a situation he never knew about and wasn't even planned when it happened to be a switch. But it was all for the better.

The AWA was dying and Bockwinkel got his WWF offer three months later. While Gagne got a huge retirement in 1981, and the big comebacks, Bockwinkel's career as a full-timer ended quietly. As best we can tell, the last match of the Bockwinkel & Stevens team came on

June 9, 1987, in Green Bay, beating Zbyszko & Brian Knobs in a co-main event before 175 fans. Bockwinkel's farewell was on August 2, 1987, in Oshkosh, WI, putting over Hennig in an AWA title match, making him a headliner and championship match participant to the very end.

There was some humor in his WWF run, since the road agents were the guys who broke up pull-aparts and beatdowns. Heenan was an announcer by that point, and one of the rules of thumb is you couldn't mention the name of the former wrestlers breaking up the skirmishes, and there was even once an incident where Heenan had to pretend not to know who Bockwinkel was while broadcasting.

Bockwinkel ended up having a brief tryout as an announcer, and did four more matches after that point, a legends Battle Royal in 1987 (the only WWF match of his entire career, although he did wrestle Bob Backlund in a title vs. title match on March 25, 1979, in Toronto that went to a double count out in 39:10), a legends show in New Japan in 1990 where he put over Masa Saito (on the same night as Thesz's final match), a 1992 legends match at the Yokohama Arena against Robinson, with Thesz as referee, which was Robinson's final match, and his final match, on May 23, 1993, at the Omni in Atlanta, a legends match on the WCW Slamboree PPV show, where he went to a 15:00 draw with Dory Funk Jr.

NICK BOCKWINKEL CAREER TITLE HISTORY

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Verne Gagne November 8, 1975 St. Paul; lost to Verne Gagne July 18, 1980 Chicago; Awarded title May 1981 when Gagne retired; lost to Otto Wanz August 29, 1982 St. Paul; def. Otto Wanz October 9, 1982 Chicago; title held up after December 27, 1982 match with Jerry Lawler in Memphis (recognized only in Tennessee); def. Jerry Lawler January 10, 1982 Memphis; lost to Jumbo Tsuruta February 22, 1984 Tokyo; Awarded title June 29, 1986 when he was to face champion Stan Hansen in Denver and Hansen walked out of the building rather than dropping the title; lost to Curt Hennig May 2, 1987 San Francisco (originally not scheduled as a title change and the decision was to be reversed, but Gagne gave the title to Hennig stemming from that match to keep him from jumping to WWF)

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION WORLD TAG TEAM: w/Ray Stevens def. Red Bastien & The Crusher January 20, 1972 Denver; lost to Billy Robinson & Ed Francis November 15, 1972 Honolulu (title change only recognized in Hawaii, in Hawaii they later announced Robinson & Francis were stripped of the titles and they were given back to Stevens & Bockwinkel for failure to defend the titles due attributed to both men's conflicting schedules); lost to Verne Gagne & Billy Robinson December 30, 1972 Minneapolis (title change only recognized in the Twin Cities); w/Ray Stevens def. Verne Gagne & Billy Robinson January 6, 1973 St. Paul; lost to The Crusher & Billy Robinson July 21, 1974 Green Bay; w/Ray Stevens def. The Crusher & Billy Robinson October 24, 1974 Winnipeg; lost to Dick the Bruiser & The Crusher August 16, 1975 Chicago

AWA SOUTHERN HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Jerry Lawler October 11, 1982 Memphis; lost to Jerry Lawler November 8, 1982 Memphis

NWA FLORIDA TAG TEAM: w/Ray Stevens def. Hiro Matsuda & Tim Woods July 18, 1972 Tampa; lost to Hiro Matsuda & Bob Orton Sr. August 15, 1972 Tampa

WRESTLING OBSERVER HALL OF FAME - 1996

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING HALL OF FAME 2003

WWE HALL OF FAME - 2007

NOVEMBER 30, 2015

A correction on the Nick Bockwinkel story. In the title change match with Curt Hennig, Hennig hit Bockwinkel with a roll of dimes, not Brass Knuckles, to win the title in the match where the title was a first not supposed to change hands. Also, we neglected to mention that Bockwinkel was also a member of the Tragos/Thesz Hall of Fame, having been inducted in 2009. I don't know if this is true or not, but Bob Holiday, who was the local promoter for the AWA in Winnipeg at the time of the Flair vs. Bockwinkel match in 1986, claimed that Flair worked the match for free because he had bet his entire payoff for the Bockwinkel match on an NFL game with Wally Karbo (who helped run the AWA with Verne Gagne).

MAD DOG VACHON

Maurice Vachon, an amateur wrestling prodigy, vaunted street fighter, worldwide pro wrestling superstar and cultural icon in parts of Canada, passed away in his sleep on 11/21 at his home in Omaha, at the age of

In all, Vachon was among pro wrestling's all-time most memorable characters, and greatest promo men. It was once said by Ric Flair, who grew up watching Vachon as AWA champion and the top heel rival of Verne Gagne and The Crusher in the 60s, that you don't know wrestling unless you've seen a Mad Dog Vachon interview. A member of every significant pro wrestling Hall of Fame, Vachon was listed in the book, "The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels," as the fourth greatest heel in pro wrestling history, behind only Buddy Rogers, Gorgeous George and The Sheik.

With his shaved head, menacing scowl missing several teeth, goatee and unique guttural voice, he was both unmistakable and as memorable as they come. Although billed at 5-foot-9, Vachon was really only 5-foot-6 ½ and in his prime, maybe 200 pounds, although he got heavier and paunchier as he got older. But few would argue he was among the most fearsome and intimidating wrestlers of the last 60 years. And as a street fighter, everyone knew he was the living embodiment of the Tasmanian Devil.

Billy Robinson, who never even came across Mad Dog until Vachon was long past his prime, when asked about wrestlers from his generation who could have been MMA stars, always mentions Vachon first. Robinson said that he had no doubt that if UFC was around during the 50s and 60s that Vachon would have been world middleweight champion.

"I spent my whole life trying to get people to hate me. I failed miserably," Vachon said in 1987, when he received 4,000 letters from people around the world after he was hit by a car while jogging and nearly being killed. The accident caused him to have much of his right leg amputated. He used an artificial leg, which Kevin Nash took off him and both he and opponent Shawn Michaels used it as a weapon in their 1996 WWF PPV match.

Mad Dog Vachon, with the trademark bald head and goatee, and the missing teeth, was born in 1962, when he started out in the Pacific Northwest.

"During a match I went outside the ring and started to turn everything upside down," Vachon said. "A policeman tried to stop me, and I hit him, too."

Backstage, after the match, Owen told him that he looked like a mad dog out there. The name, one of the great ones in wrestling history, stuck. Owen wanted to create the idea of this uncivilized wildman, so billed him as being from Algiers, Algeria, which became his billed home town in many circuits for the bulk of the rest of his career.

Aside from a quick trip back home over the summer of 1963, Vachon remained based out of Oregon, where he was one of the biggest stars and best drawing cards they had ever had, garnering a reputation as a

major singles star. He won the Pacific Northwest title four times, until he headed to Nebraska.

Wrestling for promoter Joe Dusek, he was brought in to be the same successful headliner he had been in Oregon. He went on a long unbeaten streak. He's also remembered by fans in that part of the country as perhaps the biggest star and most memorable character of that era in Nebraska.

His first run climaxed by beating Verne Gagne on May 2, 1964, in Omaha, to win the AWA world heavyweight title.

In those days, Nebraska was part of the AWA, but a separate full-time circuit. They would frequently do AWA title changes in Omaha that were quickies, for a week or two, and only recognized in the state of Nebraska. During that two week period, Gagne would continue to defend the title in the big AWA circuit. They'd quickly get things back to normal, usually on the following show in Omaha. Two weeks later, Gagne returned to hand Vachon his first loss and regain the title.

But Gagne was evidently impressed by what he experienced, because he brought Vachon to the main circuit a few weeks later. On October 20, 1964, Vachon beat Gagne in Minneapolis and this time was recognized everywhere as the AWA champion, making him one of the biggest stars in the business as one of pro wrestling's big four world champions along with Lou Thesz (NWA), Bruno Sammartino (WWWF) and Cowboy Bob Ellis (WWA).

During his first reign as champion, he defeated the likes of Pat O'Connor, Billy Red Cloud, Yukon Moose Cholak, Pampero Firpo, Reggie Parks, Ivan Kalmikoff, The Mongolian Stomper, Blackjack Lanza, Don Jardine, Mighty Igor Vodik, Wilbur Snyder, Dick the Bruiser, Danny Hodge and The Crusher. While still holding the AWA title, he returned to Oregon and actually held the Pacific Northwest title and AWA title at the same time. As AWA champion, he actually lost to Stan Stasiak in both Portland and Seattle on his way out in his short run.

He lost the AWA title to Crusher on August 21, 1965, in St. Paul, but regained it on November 12, 1965, in Denver. A big match during this run came on February 26, 1966, in Chicago, where Vachon faced WWA champion Dick the Bruiser, in a unification match. This was not the same WWA title that was considered one of the big four at the time. That WWA title was based in Los Angeles and recognized in Japan as well. Bruiser had gone to Los Angeles and won that title. Then, prior to a match at the Olympic Auditorium with Destroyer in 1964, Ellis had attacked Bruiser, causing him to lose via count out. Destroyer won the WWA title, and Bruiser returned home to Indianapolis, claiming he was still WWA champion and that became Indiana's version of the world title for the next two decades. It became the only WWA title in 1968, when the Los Angeles office rejoined the NWA.

Since the AWA title was more prestigious, Vachon went over in the Chicago unification match, winning via count out. But the title change wasn't acknowledged in Indiana, where Bruiser ran the promotion and continued to defend the title. Vachon was billed as the unified champion in Chicago until he lost the AWA title one year later to Gagne, at which point it was just called the AWA title and the WWA title was never talked about on Chicago shows.

Another notable match came on January 2, 1967, in Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens, where Vachon wrestled Bruno Sammartino. What made this match historically significant is you had the AWA champion facing the WWWF champion on an NWA show. It wasn't a unification match, as in this instance, Vachon was not billed as a champion. It was only billed in Toronto as Sammartino defending his title, in a match Sammartino won.

While still holding the AWA title, he went to Atlanta on January 13, 1967, to team with Paul Vachon to beat Alberto & Enrique Torres to win their version of the world tag team title.

While he had some main events a few years earlier on trips to Montreal, his first run as a top singles headliner came due to his reputation garnered in Oregon and the AWA as a money drawing champion.

Remaining AWA champion, he beat Hans Schmidt in Chicoutimi, Quebec, on January 24, 1967, to win the Montreal version of the International title. He had to win the AWA title and hold it for several years before he could return home and truly be recognized as a superstar. During 1967, he drew the largest crowd of the year at a time when wrestling was not in a hot period in the province, drawing 12,000 fans for a match at the Forum in Montreal where he teamed with Sweet Daddy Siki against Johnny Rougeau & Carpentier.

The Vachon Brothers lost the Georgia version of the world tag titles back to Enrique & Ramon Torres on February 3, 1967. Vachon then dropped the AWA title to Gagne in St. Paul on February 26, 1967. During this period, he was working four different circuits, Georgia, Quebec, AWA and Nebraska.

During what was recognized throughout the AWA as his second and longest title run, he defended his title against Tim Woods, Stan Pulaski (Eric Pomeroy, who in Georgia became his brother, Stan Vachon), Crusher, Igor, Snyder, Parks, Mr. Wrestling (Woods under a mask, and Vachon actually helped come up with the idea for Woods to don the white mask and call himself Mr. Wrestling, as masked babyfaces on top were a rarity in those days), Gagne, O'Connor, Billy Red Cloud, Chris Markoff, Bruiser, Bobby Managoff, Haru Sasaki, Luke Brown, Ernie Ladd, Killer Kowalski, Ron Reed (Buddy Colt), Dale Lewis, Carlos Colon and Grizzly Smith.

"Here was a guy who was a horrible worker, and no matter who you were, you had to adapt to his style, and you never knew what the hell he was going to do," said Bill Watts in the book "Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Heels." "But did Mad Dog draw money? You're damn right he drew money. Why'd he draw money if he was such a bad worker? He drew money because of the intensity of who he was. His interviews were so dominant because he believed that he was the toughest son of a bitch that walked. And he may have been."

He returned to Quebec for a full-time run in May, 1967. While in Minneapolis, he met a kindred spirit, a tall, balding, shy amateur wrestler named James Raschke from Omaha. Raschke wasn't doing well as a pro wrestler. Vachon met him in Minneapolis, looked at him, and told him he'd make a good German. He gave him his break in 1967, bringing him to Montreal to be his tag team partner, Baron Fritz Von Raschke.

"He had all the instincts and was one of the greatest professional wrestlers of all-time," said Raschke.

The big tag team run of Mad Dog & Butcher Vachon in the AWA started at the beginning of 1969. During that period, with AWA champion Gagne wrestling a very limited schedule, it was the Vachons on top who carried the territory from the heel side, during the strongest period up to that point in the history of the promotion. They rarely lost, and when they did it was mostly via DQ, except against their hottest rivals, the Flying Redheads of Red Bastien & Billy "Red" Lyons.

The Vachons finally captured the AWA tag titles from Dick the Bruiser & The Crusher on August 30, 1969, at the International Amphitheatre in Chicago, before more than 10,000 fans, in a match where the story was that Crusher injured his leg.

They headlined during that period mostly against Lyons & Bastien, who were considered by many as the best working babyface tag team in the country at the time. Among the other teams they worked with were Watts & Snyder, O'Connor & Snyder, Watts & Man Mountain Mike, Carpentier & Snyder, Bruiser & Moose Cholak, Watts & Carpentier, Crusher & Carpentier, Gagne & Crusher, Pepper Gomez & Carpentier, Gomez & Crusher, Ladd & Snyder, Ladd & Brazil, Crusher & Igor, fellow heels Lars Anderson & Larry Hennig, heels Nick Bockwinkel & Lanza, giants Plowboy Stan Frazier & Tex McKenzie, Bastien & Gomez, Bastien & Hercules Cortez, Gagne & Haystacks Calhoun and Crusher & Bull Bullinski.

The biggest business was in 1970, coming off one of the legendary angles in AWA history. It started at the January 17, 1970, TV tapings of All-Star Wrestling in Minneapolis. The Vachons were facing Carpentier & jobber Bruce Kirk. They had destroyed Kirk and were double-teaming Carpentier, when Crusher came out to make the save. In the ensuing brawl, Crusher rammed Mad Dog's head into the ringpost. Vachon went to the ground to blade his forehead, and accidentally, Crusher stomped on the back of Vachon's head on the floor, causing the blade to go in too deep, which caused him to cut an artery.

The blood spurted out of Vachon's head. Vachon's blood got all over the curtains of the TV studio, and they were nearly banned from the building. Both fans, and some of the TV stations that aired the footage complained to the promotion about the violence. Rodger Kent, doing the announcing, went completely out of character, screaming for help, saying that Mad Dog was bleeding to death and somebody needed to get him a pressure bandage. Vachon needed dozens of stitches, with the number growing as time went on. But the out-of-control chaos was memorable, and led to the most famous run of the Crusher vs. Mad Dog feud.

The feud drew record business throughout the AWA. A week later, in Crusher's home town of Milwaukee, they drew 12,000 fans at the Arena, at the time the city's indoor record. A cage match on the next show at the St. Paul Civic Center drew 10,048 fans. Tag title matches with the Vachons vs. Carpentier & Crusher were doing big business everywhere. The most famous match, on June 13, 1970, a singles cage match at the Milwaukee Arena, drew 12,076 fans paying \$58,270, setting the all-time Wisconsin gate record. For decades, this was the single most remembered wrestling match in the city, largely because as Vachon was beating down on Crusher, a middle-aged woman hopped the rail and started climbing the cage to try and save Crusher.

On a television talk show after Crusher passed away in 2005, it was said that even at that time, even 35 years later, you could go into any bar in Milwaukee and bring up wrestling, and the conversation would inevitably lead to the bloodbath at the Arena where the old lady tried to climb the cage.

On August 14, 1970, at Comiskey Park in Chicago, a cage match where the Vachons retained the tag team titles winning two of three falls from Bruiser & Crusher drew 21,000 fans paying \$148,000, the largest wrestling crowd in the world that year and, at the time, the largest pro wrestling gate ever in the United States.

In early 1971, they went to Japan as champions for the IWE, retaining their titles over Great Kusatsu & Thunder Sugiyama twice. Before going, they stopped in Portland on February 23, 1971, and lost the titles to Kurt & Karl Von Steiger, in a title change only recognized in Oregon. Then they went to Honolulu the next day, where they got a win in defending their titles over Gagne & Billy Robinson (this was before Robinson was in the AWA as he was a star in Hawaii first) when Mad Dog pinned Gagne in the third fall. Then, after Japan, Gagne beat Mad Dog to keep the AWA title on March 14, 1971, in Honolulu. They went back to Portland on March 16, 1971, to beat the Von Steigers via DQ in a match where the title could change hands that way, and retained them, winning via DQ in a rematch two nights later in Salem, and end that tag title story in Oregon.

Part two of our look at Mad Dog Vachon will be in next week's issue

James Raschke, a shy former member of the University of Nebraska and later U.S. national wrestling team, makes no bones about the fact he owes his long career as Baron Von Raschke to his friend of 47 years, the late Maurice "Mad Dog" Vachon.

"When I was breaking into the business, Verne Gagne broke me in, and I was working setting up the rings and refereeing, I first met Mad Dog. I didn't know him. It was at the Director's booth at the TV station (in Minneapolis in 1966, where AWA All-Star Wrestling was taped). I helped set up the ring and was told to watch the matches like a rookie, which I

was at the time. I set up the ring and watched, in a dark room, in the hallway, I heard a voice, I didn't even know who it was at first, and he said, 'You'd make a great German,' in his Mad Dog voice."

The next two or three tapings, whenever Vachon would see Raschke, he'd pause, say the same words, "You'd make a great German," and walk away. Vachon didn't even know Raschke was of German heritage, nor that Raschke actually studied German while in college.

Finally, at a show, the two were formally introduced. They got along because of their similar backgrounds. Raschke placed third in the 1963 world championships in Greco-Roman wrestling in the heavyweight division, the best finish any American had ever had in the world championships in Greco-Roman wrestling in any weight class up to that point in time. He was considered as having a shot at being the first Olympic Greco-Roman medalist in U.S. history, but suffered an injury that year, and couldn't compete. It wouldn't be until 1984 that an American medaled in Greco-Roman. Raschke got a job as a school teacher, which didn't pay much. Verne Gagne then tried to recruit him to be a pro wrestler.

"Before I met him (Vachon), Verne took me to my first pro wrestling matches," he said. "I'd only seen pro wrestling once or twice in my life. I wasn't interested in pro wrestling growing up. He took me to an outdoor show at the baseball stadium in St. Paul. The main event was Mad Dog Vachon against The Crusher (most likely an August 21, 1965 show at Midway Stadium where Crusher pinned Vachon to win the AWA title). I'd heard both of their names. I'd never met Crusher. They got in the ring. I was in the first couple of rows. I watched them and I was impressed. I was a longtime amateur wrestler, and even boxed a little bit. I was amazed with what I saw, how close they worked. It looked like they were killing each other. And they probably were."

Then Raschke agreed to break in. Gagne trained him and started him at the bottom, working on the ring crew.

"He was already a big star and we started talking, and got friendly," said Raschke. "After a while, he asked me if I wanted to be his tag team partner in the Montreal territory. Jack Britton (the father of Gino Brito) and the Rougeaus (Johnny and Jacques Sr.) owned it. I said, 'Sure.' I didn't know any better. I was only a rookie. He said once again in his Mad Dog voice, 'You'd make a good German. We'll call you Baron Fritz Von Pumpkin.' I said, 'Let me think about that.'"

Raschke, only a few months in the business, talked to Wally Karbo, Gagne's co-promoter, who told him Vachon probably got the idea from a wrestler who was a major star in Oregon when Vachon became a major star a few years earlier, Kurt Von Poppenheim. Raschke, even with his limited knowledge of wrestling, didn't think Fritz Von Pumpkin was the greatest heat getting name, thinking he'd come out and people would laugh at him, which was not what he was looking for. He told Vachon that his own last name was a nice German name.

"I had just gotten married and we took everything we owned, which was our two rubber tree plants and all our clothes, and we went to Montreal from Minneapolis," he said. "When we got there, Mad Dog and I went the first Monday to the Paul Suave Arena in Downtown Montreal. I had a singles match that night with Larry Moquin, an old-timer, a seasoned veteran. Larry made me look really good. This was my first night as Baron Fritz Von Raschke. My wife's girlfriend had made me a short cape out of red and black material and off I went. The people booed and hissed, so I reacted. I got a lot of heat. Later, Dog and I came out for an interview. I didn't even know we were going to a place where French was the main language. I said a few things in broken German with an accent, but I wasn't too sure of myself. Mad Dog was always a great interview."

"The next week, we were a tag team. He got all this heat. Everyone knew him from years gone by. I got it by being associated with him. He was short and handsome. I was tall and handsome," Raschke joked. "He was teaching me all the time. I learned so much wrestling with him as a partner. He was my friend, my mentor, my guide for my first eight, nine, ten months in the business."

Raschke quickly learned Vachon's reputation in Montreal.

"You didn't want to cross him. He was a very tough man, a tough street guy. We were a tag team. I don't want to exaggerate. But almost every night he wrestled, especially if we wrestled Carpentier and Johnny Rougeau, our matches seemed to end in a riot. I was so new. I didn't even know what was happening. He'd let the heat build up. Then it would explode. We had to fight our way back to the dressing room so many times."

One night, they had a cage match scheduled against the Rougeau Brothers, Jacques Sr. & Johnny. The fans were so rabid that they tore down the cage before the match even started.

"The cage was lying on the floor," he said. "So this time, we actually had to fight just to get to the ring, and when it was over, we had to fight our way back. He was always the lead guy in the fight."

"He'd clear the way and would tell me, 'Don't go down, because if you go down, you're done.' He liked getting that kind of heat."

The tag team, which was reprised years later in separate runs in the AWA and later the Central States, ended the first time when Vachon suffered a broken pelvis in an auto accident at the time he was International heavyweight champion. Trying to keep the territory strong with Vachon gone as top heel, the promotion brought in The Sheik to carry the title. But Sheik had his own territory and was in demand all over the world, so by November 1967, Von Raschke, barely a year in the business, was champion in one of the strongest wrestling territories in the world at the time.

"I was on my own, but all his heat carried over to me," Raschke said. "The territory kept blossoming. It made me, to where I could get booked almost anywhere I wanted after that."

Bobby Heenan noted that working with Vachon were some of the most physical matches of his career. He said Vachon's fists were like little shovels, and because of the storylines and character portrayals, the times Vachon actually got a hold of Heenan, he had to give him a beating. Heenan said Vachon would take him down in the corner and repeatedly punch him to the body and it felt like he was being hit with a weapon with every blow.

Once, they were in a match that went outside a building that was next to the train tracks. Vachon took him outside, and pinned him down on the tracks and was beating on him, Heenan asked quietly, "When do I get up?"

"When you hear the train," said Vachon.

Dick "Destroyer" Beyer, who first wrestled Vachon in a main event when it was babyface Dick Beyer against Maurice Vachon in the main event at the Honolulu Civic Auditorium in 1962, remembered late in both men's career having a battle in Montreal.

"The Mad Dog says to me, 'We got to give them a barn burner here,'" Beyer said to In Your Head radio. "They expect that we're going to knock the hell out of each other.' So we started out the match wrestling, and then all of a sudden it was kick, stomp, throw out of the ring. Mad Dog came out, he hit me with a chair, and out the aisle we went."

Vachon took Destroyer into the dressing room and was pounding on him there until Beyer yelled, "Mad Dog, there's no fans here! It's just the boys. Let's get the hell out in the arena."

Vachon and Raschke remained friends throughout their careers, and long after both had retired. The two spoke just two days before Vachon's death. They worked as a heel tag team in the mid-70s in the AWA. Vachon a few years later turned cult babyface when he and Verne Gagne went after AWA world tag team champions Pat Patterson & Ray Stevens eventually winning the titles.

The storyline there was that Gagne had tried to win the tag team title with various partners, including Billy Robinson, who had been pushed for years as the area's best wrestler, and Crusher, its best brawler. Finally, discouraged that no matter who he chose, they could never get the job done, Gagne said he had to fight fire with fire, and get the dirtiest, nastiest wrestler in the business and his biggest career rival, and brought in Vachon as his partner. With Gagne, time always stood still, so even though Vachon was a few months before his 50th birthday, and Gagne was a few years older, in the AWA, they were still portrayed in 1979 as they were in 1966 when they were the big singles stars.

Von Raschke's babyface turn came after the AWA had shot an injury angle where Jerry Blackwell & John Studd had put Vachon out of action. Von Raschke, while wrestling in Florida, cut his first babyface promo, vowing revenge for his mentor.

"Something happened to Mad Dog, he was gone from the wrestling scene for a while," said Raschke. "I got this call, Wally (Karbo) called and said, 'We want you to come back and be Mad Dog's avenger. I did an interview for that. It got over. While he was injured, I don't remember if it was a work or shoot, but he was living in Winnipeg and got a job in the gold mines in the Northern territory. They flew him in and bused him to the mines. It was so cold they had to shuttle him to the mines. It was terribly cold, ice. He called me and said, 'Baron, it's dark, cold, quiet and it's beautiful.' He worked in the mines and everyone recognized him. Everyone knew he was Mad Dog, so everyone there thought he was a spy for the company."

When he returned, he claimed that when he was injured, he got a job working in the gold mines in the Northern territory to get himself back in shape for wrestling. He said it was cold and dark and he suffered, reaching new lows, until he hit rock bottom, and at that point he realized he had to come back and get back at Blackwell and Studd.

Vachon was a wildman when he was young. A lot of wrestlers found him difficult to work with. He mixed in technical wrestling with his brawling into the early 60s. But by the time he got to the AWA and became one of the biggest stars in the business with his world title reigns, he was in pure Mad Dog mode.

Along with The Crusher and Gagne, they built the AWA territory into what many considered to be among the best territories to work. The money was good, as regulars could earn \$45,000 to \$75,000 per year, which in the 60s was very good money. They worked 15 to 18 shows per month, with the schedule slowing down in the summer so they could enjoy the hunting, fishing or other hobbies. The idea was to run less often because the idea was that the people had other things to do. Also, Crusher, the top star, would frequently get into fights with Verne Gagne on money, some would joke, like clockwork, just before the summer. He'd quit, go home, and then they'd make up in the fall. There were also downsides, like traveling long distances by car in horrible weather. Still, in the late 70s, when Jack Adkisson (Fritz Von Erich) suggested to AWA champion Nick Bockwinkel that he could get him a run with the NWA world title, a position that paid significantly better, Bockwinkel presumed more than double of what he was earning, Bockwinkel still turned it down because he liked the lifestyle he was leading.

Vachon was a regular until 1971, when he and his brother dropped the tag team titles to help open up Grand Prix Wrestling. But he was always used as a special attraction, sometimes as a de facto babyface as the guy being brought into town to face the new top heels, and other times back in his familiar heel role. One major program in 1973 was Crusher calling on his arch enemy, Mad Dog, to face his new big nemesis, Superstar Billy Graham & Ivan Koloff. After Graham, with help from Koloff, did the unthinkable, and beat Crusher in a singles match (Crusher hated to lose and almost never did anywhere in that era, let alone in Milwaukee), a tag team cage match set the city's all-time gate record, breaking the mark Crusher had set with Mad Dog in their legendary 1970 match.

In 1974, ABC's Wide World of Sports agreed to televise pro wrestling on network TV for the first time in nearly two decades. The segment on the show that dominated Saturday afternoon television during that era, was built around an early match of 420-pound Chris Taylor, a star off the

1972 Olympics, where he won a bronze medal. Taylor was early in his career. Gagne put Vachon in as Taylor's opponent. It was something to see the legendary Jim McKay call a pro wrestling match. Taylor was limited and Mad Dog only did his usual act. It wasn't much of a match. McKay noted that it was real blood coming out of Taylor's nose as Vachon roughed him up, but that "he's really not choking him over the ropes," as Vachon was doing and refused to stop when a DQ was called.

Later, Taylor got his revenge, as he threw out Vachon when he and Ken Patera, both off the Olympic team, were the two survivors in winning a two-ring Battle Royal, which sold out the International Amphitheatre in Chicago. It was one of only two network broadcasts of wrestling in the 70s, the other being in 1976 when Muhammad Ali did matches in Chicago against Kenny Jay and Buddy Wolff, prior to his closed-circuit match with Antonio Inoki.

Once Gagne called him to be his tag team partner against Patterson & Stevens, Vachon was a babyface from that point on. The AWA was doing well, but really exploded from 1981 to 1983 with Hulk Hogan as the top star. Vachon, in his 50s, was kept off wrestling on television, with only clips of his arena matches shown. He did little in the ring. Sometimes it was sad because when doing the piledriver, the move he made famous in the territory in the 60s, he would struggle just to get his opponent up, and nearly lose them.

There was a story from that era that became famous in wrestling lore. Vachon, on Gagne's small plane that the main event wrestlers would travel in, at one point opened up the door of the plane while flying, which forced an emergency landing.

Raschke believes that somebody slipped Vachon a pill, as he would have never done such a thing on his own. Vachon threw one of the wrestlers' bags out the door laughing at the idea it was going to crash somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

Raschke said he wasn't on the plane, but noted that it's a famous story among wrestlers of that era, and that he's talked to several who were in the plane, but everyone gave him a different story as to what happened.

"I've probably heard the story 50 times, but it's been told 50 different ways. It's like Ray Stevens said, 'What good is a story like that if you can't embellish it?'"

Gagne, who was also not on the plane, was furious and read him the riot act. He was screaming at Vachon for what he did, and told Vachon as punishment he was banning him from the plane, which would force him to make long drives in the car to get around the territory. When he was done, Vachon responded, when talking about his next booking "So Verne, what time does the plane leave?"

Perhaps his most memorable promo, which was not the usual market-specific promo, but a one-take job where Vachon was in his workshop with a hammer and other tools, constructing a coffin for Blackwell that he vowed to put him in. The promo played in every AWA city, and in most cities, multiple times. Part of its effectiveness was the way Blackwell sold it on his own interviews after it would play. The idea was actually something from Vachon's past, as he did a similar promo building a coffin for Lonnie Mayne when they were feuding in Oregon, and built to drawing what at the time was the biggest crowd ever in Oregon for wrestling in the late 60s at the peak of that feud, where Mayne ended up putting Vachon in the coffin.

"Mad Dog was probably the consummate interview guy," said Mean Gene Okerlund on In Your Head radio, who handled the interviews for the AWA during the Vachon babyface era. "Whether it was behind the cage or it was in a workshop trying to construct a coffin, or whatever it happened to be, he was a classic in every sense of the word. I think what everybody has said about him is what it is. He was kind of a favorite of mine and I think he was a favorite of the boys in the locker room. Certainly, even though the fans at one time or another probably hated him vehemently, he ended up being kind of the guy they loved to hate."

Vachon's debut in Minneapolis, on July 9, 1963, at the Auditorium, was less than memorable. Before a near sellout crowd that saw Crusher, with help from Dick the Bruiser, beat Gagne, via count out, to win the AWA title, Maurice Vachon worked the second match of the show, losing to Don McClarity. It was just a one-shot deal, driving from Oregon back to Montreal, where he worked the summer of 1963. He was still Maurice Vachon back home, and worked in the middle of the cards.

After returning to Oregon to finish 1963, he moved to Omaha at the start of 1964 for promoter Joe Dusek. On January 3, 1964, he dropped the Pacific Northwest title to The Destroyer at the Portland Armory. The next day, he debuted at the Omaha Civic Auditorium in a prelim match beating Maurice LaPointe, the first place outside of Oregon that he was Mad Dog Vachon.

By May 2, 1964, Vachon beat Gagne in Omaha before 6,025 fans, the largest crowd of the year, to win the AWA title, in a title switch only recognized in Nebraska. Gagne won it back two weeks later before 5,520 fans. Two weeks later, Gagne brought him to Minneapolis, this time as Mad Dog Vachon, beating Billy Goetz in a mid-card match. By October 20, 1964, he beat Gagne for the fully recognized AWA title in Minneapolis before 3,979 fans. Crowds immediately picked up to 5,000 to 7,000 fans for Vachon's title defenses until he lost to Gagne via DQ before a sellout of 9,109 on Thanksgiving night. The whole territory was up in 1965, particularly when Vachon was matched with Bruiser, Crusher or Gagne, including sellouts on April 17, 1965, and June 26, 1965, for Minneapolis title matches with Gagne.

Vachon regained the title on November 12, 1965, in Denver, before 4,000 fans, setting up a rematch with Crusher on the Thanksgiving show on November 25, 1965, which drew a near sellout 8,116 fans.

Omaha was down, but Vachon came up with an idea. Vachon had worked on top in title matches with Tim Woods. Vachon was always a big fan of guys with legitimate amateur backgrounds, and suggested that Woods remake himself as Mr. Wrestling, with a white mask. In that era, masked men were always heels. But Mr. Wrestling in Omaha and later Georgia, where he became an even bigger star, was there to represent the purest in technical wrestling and skill.

For the January 8, 1966, show in Omaha, Mr. Wrestling promised he would take off his mask and win the AWA title from Vachon. He unmasked before the match, revealing himself as Tim Woods, and then won the title, but his feet were on the ropes for leverage. A week later, the local Omaha World Record reported that AWA President Stanley Blackburn had reviewed the match and evidence showed Woods with his feet on the ropes while scoring the fall, so the result was overturned to a no contest, and a rematch was ordered. Vachon "regained" the title in a match that went 60:00, with Vachon winning the first fall, and going on his bicycle and stalling out the rest of the match.

After suffering a broken pelvis in August of that year, he was out of action until January, when he returned to the AWA. That summer, he returned to Oregon, and his feud with Mayne was so hot that their biggest match, on July 9, 1968, was moved to the Memorial Coliseum and drew more than 10,000 fans. He went to Southern California before a Japan tour, and was only in the territory a few weeks. After beating Mil Mascaras at the Olympic Auditorium, the September 6, 1968, match where Bobo Brazil retained his WWA title over Vachon, who was disqualified for biting, drew a sellout reported at more than 11,000.

In 1969, after matches where AWA tag team champions Bruiser & Crusher did crowds of 9,512 and 8,708 in Milwaukee against The Vachons, they did the title switch to the Vachons in Chicago before 10,000 fans at the Amphitheatre on August 30, 1969.

The territory picked up, largely because the Vachons could draw as tag champs on a regular basis. Bruiser & Crusher were big draws whenever they teamed. But with Bruiser owning the Indianapolis promotion, it was hard to get a lot of dates on him for the AWA territory. The big program for the rest of 1969 was a successful title program with the Vachons vs. The Flying Redheads, Billy "Red" Lyons & Red Bastien.

The AWA in 1970 was highlighted by The Crusher vs. Mad Dog feud coming off the bloodbath on television. St. Paul, Milwaukee and Winnipeg all sold out within a one week period. Denver did a near sellout, and then sold out for a Gagne & Crusher vs. Vachons match. Milwaukee, Crusher's home city, was sellout almost every month leading to the famous cage match. Even after the cage match, the return a month later with the Vachons vs. Bruiser & Crusher drew 10,812. Comiskey Park in Chicago with the Vachons vs. Bruiser & Crusher in a cage match did 21,000 fans and set the North American all-time gate record at the time with \$148,000. Denver set its record for a Crusher vs. Mad Dog cage match. Minneapolis/St. Paul was only doing average business, but the rest of the major cities were all peaking at record levels.

On May 15, 1971, in Milwaukee, in a no DQ match, Bastien & Hercules Cortez beat the Vachons before 10,271 fans to win the tag team titles. The title changed hands since the Vachons were going back to Montreal to buy into Grand Prix Wrestling.

Mad Dog continued to work AWA shows during that period. The most notable match was Crusher & Mad Dog breaking their Milwaukee gate record, but instead of against each other, it was as a team, beating Superstar Billy Graham & Ivan Koloff in a cage match on September 29, 1973, doing 12,300 fans and \$64,571. On the Christmas show in Minneapolis, where Crusher & Mad Dog beat Graham & Larry Heineimi (Lars Anderson), subbing for Koloff, in a cage match, they turned 4,000 fans away. In Winnipeg, they drew more than 11,000 fans. In Milwaukee, Crusher & Mad Dog beating new AWA tag champs Ray Stevens & Nick Bockwinkel in a non-title match, drew a sellout, and they came a few hundred shy in Minneapolis.

He had four more tours of Japan after he and Butcher went in 1971 as the AWA world tag team champions.

He went twice in 1973. The first tour built to an IWA title match on March 16, 1973, in Machida, a cage match where the only way to win was via ten count knockout, where he lost to the group's top star, Shozo "Strong" Kobayashi. The second tour saw he and Ivan Koloff win the IWA tag team titles from Kobayashi & The Great Kusatsu, only to lose them back a month later to Kusatsu & Rusher Kimura.

In 1975, Vachon was the transition world champion when the decision was made to replace Mighty Inoue with Kimura as the group's top star. Vachon beat Inoue on April 10, 1975, in Tokyo, only to lose a cage match to Kimura via submission to a Boston crab in 7:25 nine days later in Sapporo.

His final tour was in 1977, in what was billed as the IWA World Series, the group's major singles tournament. What was best remembered from that tour were the bloody singles and tag matches he had with Gypsy Joe. In the finals, at Sumo Hall, he lost to Kimura.

He came back to the AWA in 1976, forming a heel tag team with Von Raschke. Nick Bockwinkel was clearly the top heel, although Von Raschke & Vachon vs. Larry Hennig & LeDuc headlined everywhere that summer. But business was nothing special. Bruiser & Crusher were tag champions, but they had the same problem, with Bruiser owning his territory. When they worked together, they were big draws, but they weren't around very much. Then when they lost the titles, it was to Blackjack Lanza & Bobby Duncum, managed by Bobby Heenan. In the fall, Vachon & Von Raschke mostly feuded with Greg Gagne & Jim Brunzell, who were just starting to rise to the main event level. But their role was to get Gagne & Brunzell credibility before the High Flyers started their program with Lanza & Duncum.

By the end of the year and early 1977, Vachon went back to a singles feud with Crusher, which was a legendary match-up due to their history in the territory. They did cage matches that sold out in Denver, Milwaukee and Winnipeg. Newspaper and fan reports in the latter two cities were that scalper business outside the shows that sold out well in advance was like nothing people had ever seen in those markets.

He returned to Quebec in late 1977 and early 1978, first as a heel, and then becoming a face, before Verne Gagne called him to be his partner to get the tag titles off Stevens & Patterson in late 1978.

Vachon, the cult hero babyface in the AWA started at that point, with business strong. He not only did the tag matches when Gagne was working, but on shows Gagne wasn't at, Vachon frequently would challenge Bockwinkel for the AWA title.

Gagne & Vachon's title win over Patterson & Stevens on June 6, 1979, in Winnipeg, drew only a little more than 3,000 fans, although in August, a title defense in the same city against Stan Hansen & Bobby Duncum sold out. Business was weak as Gagne & Vachon's main foes were the masked Super Destroyers (Bob Remus, later to become Sgt. Slaughter & Neil "Hangman" Guay.

In 1980, Adrian Adonis & Jesse Ventura, the East-West Connection, became the prime challengers for the tag title. A non-title cage match with Vachon over AWA champ Bockwinkel did 7,202 fans, in Omaha, one of the few bright spots of that period. A no DQ match with Gagne & Vachon vs. Adonis & Ventura drew more than 11,000 fans with Lord Blears as referee in Minneapolis. They also nearly sold out Denver. The title change was weird, as on July 20, 1980, in Denver, Gagne failed to show up for a tag title match and Adonis & Ventura got the title via forfeit. Gagne evidently wanted to get the titles on the new team, but didn't want to have he and his legendary partner put them over.

The AWA really caught on fire in 1982 with Hulk Hogan. An August 8, 1982 show at the St. Paul Civic Center where Gagne, who had his retirement match in 1981, came out of retirement for the first of many times, to team with Vachon, to beat Sheik Adnan Al-Kaissie & Blackwell drew 19,000 fans to the St. Paul Civic Center in the main event, of a show that also included Hogan vs. Ken Patera in an arm wrestling match.

The biggest show in AWA's history, known as "Super Sunday," was on April 24, 1983, a show so big they sold out the St. Paul Civic Center with 18,000, and had another 5,500 watching via closed circuit, which set the AWA's all-time attendance and gate record. The main event was Bockwinkel vs. Hogan for the AWA title, the famous match where Hogan won the bout and seemingly won the title, only to have the decision reversed because Hogan had thrown Bockwinkel over the top rope before he pinned him. But pushed just as hard, and the match that actually went on in the main event slot, was Vachon & Gagne vs. Blackwell & Al-Kaissie.

It was set up on the March 13, 1983, show at the Civic Center, a loaded up sold out show where Blackwell, at this point known as Sheik Ayatollah Jerry Blackwell, a talented 400-pound blob who was actually a tremendous worker, whose team with Al-Kaissie, was known as The Sheiks, faced Mad Dog & The Baron. The bloody match saw Blackwell pin Von Raschke, and both men destroyed Vachon after the match. Gagne, who hadn't been involved in wrestling since the match a year earlier, came running in wearing street clothes. The heels destroyed him as well.

This set up the grudge match, which Gagne & Vachon won when Vachon broke Al-Kaissie's arm by coming off the top rope on it as Gagne held it outstretched. The match was terrible, but the heat was great, as the aura of Gagne & Vachon as superstar overrode that they were 57 and 53, and Vachon by this point looked and moved like he was a decade older.

Various incarnations of Vachon vs. Blackwell continued to do major business for the next several months. A two-show program in St. Paul with Bockwinkel vs. Vachon, on Thanksgiving night, drew 13,163, even with Hogan booked in Japan. The Christmas night rematch drew a sellout of 18,000. Hogan had actually quit the AWA earlier in the month when he joined the WWF, but Gagne billed him anyway to get the sellout.

Hogan leaving was the beginning of the end for the AWA. Its TV was dated. Its stars had appeal to the older fans, and with Hogan, the newer

fans as well. But when Hogan left, Gagne brought back Crusher (who had retired and Gagne hadn't called him back since he no longer needed him when Hogan became a bigger draw, as Bobby Heenan said, Crusher was the goose that laid the golden eggs, but suddenly he had a new goose laying bigger eggs). Business for the AWA was strong in 1984 even without Hogan. Crusher & Mad Dog & Von Raschke beat Ventura & Masa Saito & Blackwell in cage matches that drew big everywhere but the new AWA markets. But it was inevitable that with Hogan, better television and a far stronger product with more depth, that the AWA's days as "The Major League of Professional Wrestling" were numbered.

Vachon was a surprising raid. He debuted at the June 15, 1984, TV tapings in St. Louis. But at that point, with all the younger steroided up guys and him going into markets around the country that he wasn't a legend in, Vachon wasn't going to get over. He had really been limited for years. Gagne always protected area legends in his booking, although his booking like time stood still caught up to him when competition came in.

Vachon worked regularly through 1984 as a regular on the WWF circuit, but it didn't work outside the nostalgia reaction he'd get in markets he was a legend in. By 1985, he was only being booked almost only in the old AWA cities and Quebec, and even there he was limited to working prelims. When the WWF cut him loose in September of 1985, and the AWA brought him back and tried to push him, but it no longer worked. The AWA was dying and the older fans were gone. Mad Dog had been shown to be a washed up opening match guy in the WWF. He worked some indies in the Midwest, and did his farewell tour in 1986.

Even well into his 50s, in the core AWA cities, Vachon was still over like a major main eventer, and often headlined in front of big crowds when Hogan was wrestling in Japan. In cities like Winnipeg, where he lived for years, Milwaukee, because of the feud with Crusher, and Montreal, he was a name that everyone recognized instantly, whether or not they even watched wrestling.

But when the AWA would go into new markets, where his history wasn't as strong, people saw him as a short, paunchy, old man who couldn't do much. The interviews and character were more than main event level, but it was harder for fans in places where he didn't have history to take him seriously.

Because of that, it was a miscalculation on everyone's part when Vachon jumped to the WWF at the time they were trying to raid everyone from the AWA. In a land of younger steroid bodies, Vachon's unique voice talking about it being "A Dog Eat Dog World," wasn't enough to make the new generation of fans think they were seeing the Mad Dog Vachon of 20 years earlier. When he did come back to the AWA, by then, the bloom was off the rose for both him and the promotion. He also worked some for International Wrestling out of Montreal, announcing a retirement tour throughout Quebec.

His farewell match was on October 13, 1986, where the 57-year-old Vachon teamed with long-time rival Jos LeDuc to beat Man Mountain Moore & Gilles "The Fish" Poisson, another wrestler that Vachon started out in the 60s, before 3,200 fans

His farewell drew tremendous media attention, but not much at the box office, because the Montreal territory was also going down the tubes by that point when all the good talent went to WWF.

On October 9, 1987, he was taking his regular early morning walk/jog on a gravel road near his sister-in-law's home in Des Moines when he was plowed into by a hit-and-run driver.

His wife, Kathie, arrived quickly, and saw the Ford LTD drive away. The car had no hood, whether that was from the accident or it had no hood to begin with was unknown. When he was eventually found, his left leg looked like it had been destroyed, bent and twisted in all kind of directions. He right leg, visually, looked fine, although doctors believed it had been run over. He was rushed by ambulance to Iowa City, because they felt the university doctors were better equipped to take

care of him. They were doing surgery on the left leg. When they felt the right leg, it was tight as a drum. They had to cut it open to relieve pressure. They found it was suffering from gangrene and had to amputate it.

The story was not big at all in Iowa City, but was gigantic in Canada. Every day, his wife, Kathie, was constantly on the phone with the Canadian media. He received thousands of letters, phone calls, telegrams, flowers and fruit baskets from the most prominent politicians in Canada, artists, corporate presidents, top Canadian athletes and wrestling fans.

They were doing well at the time, but for all the work Vachon was doing, he was decidedly not rich.

"We live well, but we're not what you'd call well off," said Kathie Vachon at the time. "We're just average. We have a home, a Chevrolet and a Pontiac. Maurice has a manager to pay. And Canadian money doesn't go real far here in the U.S."

A 59-year-old man, who had no insurance, was eventually charged with the hit-and-run.

When he could finally get out of the hospital and returned to Quebec, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who had called Vachon while in the hospital, sent his airplane to bring him in.

Vachon lived 26 more years. He learned to get around with his prosthetic leg.

In 1991, his sister, Diane, who wrestled as Vivian Vachon, then 40, and her nine-year-old daughter, were killed by a drunk driver who had run a stop sign. She was long-since retired from pro wrestling. Vivian Vachon, who worked as a model, and later cut some record singles when she was young, by the early 70s was generally considered the best woman wrestler performing in North America, as the perennial AWA women's champion. There was a movie, "Wrestling Queen," done about her.

In recent years, his health had taken a turn for the worst. His left leg also had to be amputated, and he was relegated to a wheelchair and needed to be taken care of. His memory faded badly. In 2009 in Quebec when he came in for the Hall of Fame, he was able to be Mad Dog when photos needed to be shot and TV cameras were rolling, but it was clearly difficult. He didn't recognize his sister. By last year, when his brother Paul came to visit for the last time after driving back from Las Vegas and the Cauliflower Alley Club banquet, there were times when he didn't recognize him. He himself could no longer attend the Cauliflower Alley banquets and play Cribbage with his former ring foes. Still, his wife made sure he got to Waterloo, IA, every year for the George Tragos/Lou Thesz Hall of Fame. Raschke who would see him there, emphasized to please credit his wife for being so tremendous to him for the last 34 years. She was a wrestling fan from the 60s who saw him as the meanest man in Omaha, who married him in 1979 when Maurice was 49 and she was 30.

"I was in Minneapolis where I was working when I heard about it," said Raschke. "I found out he was in the hospital in Iowa City. As soon as I could, I drove down and saw him. He whole hotel room was full of cards, letters and flowers, from the prime minister, provincial bigwigs. I could see that my friend had become a national hero in Canada. He was hit from behind and left laying on the road."

Raschke got to Iowa City a few days and numerous operations later.

Vachon, who later when talking about that time period, said that he expected to die, and at times, wanted to die. Completely fearless up to that point, he admitted it was the only time in his life he was scared. Between the pain and the drugs, he would break down and cry.

"This is the worst pain I've been through in all my life," he said when the Montreal Gazette sent a reporter to visit him in the hospital two weeks

later. "Your body can only absorb so much punishment. This is worse than I expected death to be."

"We got to talking, and he was really depressed," said Raschke, who had never seen Vachon like that, helpless, and scared. "He told me, 'I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go.'"

Raschke tried to cheer him up. He would have none of it. Then they started talking about something, what it was doesn't really matter, but it turned into an argument.

Suddenly, without even thinking, Raschke yelled back at Vachon, "You can't argue with me on that. You don't have a leg to stand on." Suddenly, Vachon started laughing. And then he called for the cribbage board, and they sat down and played.

After retirement, perhaps his favorite pastime was playing cribbage. He didn't have to do anything physical, and it took his mind away from the handicap that plagued his last quarter-century. In recent years, when his mental faculties had started to turn on him, people were amazed that when he'd sit at the cribbage board, he could play and keep score in his head.

"He didn't finish eighth grade in school, but he read newspapers religiously, cover-to-cover," said Raschke. "He spoke French and English fluently. He was very intelligent. He was street smart. He knew the wrestling business in and out. He had a great sense of humor and was a great mentor to me."

While in Oregon, he talked Don Owen into giving a job for a fellow Montreal wrestler whose career was struggling named Pierre Clermont, who came in as Pat Patterson. It was Patterson's success in Oregon as a worker that opened the door for him to go to San Francisco, where he became the tag team partner of Ray Stevens. Patterson always stated, like Von Raschke, that he owed his career to Vachon, and told people that no matter what, he would never fully be able to pay back the debt.

It was Patterson who came up with the spot where Diesel (Kevin Nash) used Vachon's prosthetic leg on Shawn Michaels, taking it off him, in their April 28, 1996, WWF title match PPV main event, as a way of getting Vachon a payoff at that stage of his life.

On May 31, 1998, in Milwaukee, Patterson got Vachon another PPV payoff. Announcer Michael Cole got in the ring to pay tribute to Vachon and Crusher, sitting together nearly three decades after the most famous match in the history of the city. Cole gave both an appreciation plaque while Jerry Lawler, who was then still doing a heel role, complained about how the segment was a waste of time. Lawler got in the ring and started making cracks about how old and washed up the two were, and once again, took off Vachon's prosthetic leg. Crusher saved Vachon. Lawler actually went for the leg a second time, and got it off, but Crusher attacked Lawler, got it back, and hit Lawler with it. The segment was far sadder to watch than it read because of how slow moving Crusher, 71 at the time, had gotten by that point in time, and how bad it looked for Lawler to sell for him.

MAURICE "MAD DOG" VACHON CAREER TITLE HISTORY

AWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Verne Gagne May 2, 1964 Omaha; lost to Verne Gagne May 16, 1964 Omaha (title changes only recognized in Nebraska); def. Verne Gagne October 20, 1964 Minneapolis; lost to Mighty Igor Vodik May 15, 1965 Omaha; def. Mighty Igor Vodik May 22, 1965 Omaha (title changes only recognized in Nebraska); lost to The Crusher August 21, 1965 St. Paul; def. The Crusher November 12, 1965 Denver; title held up vs. Tim Woods January 8, 1966 Omaha; def. Tim Woods January 14, 1966 Omaha (title changes only recognized in Nebraska); lost to Dick the Bruiser November 12, 1966 Omaha; def. Dick the Bruiser November 19, 1966 Omaha (title changes only recognized in Nebraska); lost to Verne Gagne February 26, 1967 St. Paul

AWA WORLD TAG TEAM: w/Paul Butcher Vachon def. The Crusher & Dick the Bruiser August 30, 1969 Chicago; lost to Kurt & Karl Von Steiner February 23, 1971 Portland, OR; w/Paul Butcher Vachon def. Kurt & Karl Von Steiner March 16, 1971 Portland, OR (title changes only recognized in Oregon, the Vachons were defending the titles in Honolulu and Japan during the interim); lost to Red Bastien & Hercules Cortez May 15, 1971 Milwaukee; w/Verne Gagne def. Ray Stevens & Pat Patterson June 6, 1979 Winnipeg; lost to Jesse Ventura & Adrian Adonis via forfeit when Gagne misses July 20, 1980 match in Denver

IWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Mighty Inoue April 10, 1975 Tokyo; lost to Rusher Kimura April 19, 1975 Sapporo

IWA WORLD TAG TEAM: w/Ivan Koloff def. Strong Kobayashi & Great Kusatsu April 18, 1973 Ibaragi; lost to Rusher Kimura & Great Kusatsu May 14, 1973 Funabashi

AWA NEBRASKA HEAVYWEIGHT: def. Ernie Dusek March 28, 1964 Omaha; lost to Otto Von Krupp (Professor Boris Malenko) August 15, 1964 Omaha; def. Otto Von Krupp August 22, 1964 Omaha; lost to Billy Red Cloud October 9, 1964 Omaha

AWA NEBRASKA TAG TEAM: w/Haru Sasaki won title August 14, 1965; lost to Verne Gagne & Tex McKenzie September 4, 1965 Omaha; w/Haru Sasaki def. Verne Gagne & Tex McKenzie September 18, 1965 Omaha; Title vacated when Vachon won AWA world heavyweight title

AWA MIDWEST TAG TEAM: w/Bob Orton Sr. def. Reggie Parks & Doug Gilbert March 15, 1968 Omaha; lost to Reggie Parks & Doug Gilbert March 22, 1968 Omaha; w/Bob Orton Sr. def. Reggie Parks & Doug Gilbert April 1968; lost to Stan Pulaski & Dale Lewis April 1968; w/Paul Butcher Vachon def. Woody Farmer & Reggie Parks January 11, 1969 Omaha; lost to Stan Pulaski & Chris Tolos January 25, 1969 Omaha

WRESTLING OBSERVER HALL OF FAME (1996)

GEORGE TRAGOS/LOU THESZ PRO WRESTLING HALL OF FAME (2003)

PRO WRESTLING HALL OF FAME (2004)

WWE HALL OF FAME (2010)

A few notes on part one of the Mad Dog Vachon bio. Toronto historian Gary Will said that there was never a Bruno Sammartino vs. Mad Dog Vachon match in Toronto, let alone on January 2, 1967, when Sammartino was WWWF champion and Vachon was AWA champion. The match is listed in several Vachon career match listings, as well as in the Sammartino record book published by Georgiann Makropoulos. Politically, such a match made no sense in that time frame. But without a doubt if such a match happened on a Monday night, it was not in Toronto, which ran on Sunday afternoons.

It's possible it could have been in Quebec, where Vachon worked regularly, and Sammartino worked at times. Toronto had a show on January 1, 1967, but the main event was Gene Kiniski defending the NWA title against Johnny Valentine. Vachon, according to Will's records, never wrestled in Toronto between the years of 1960 and 1970, and when he did, before and after those dates, it was working mid-card tag teams, usually with Paul Vachon. His first singles match in the city wasn't until 1973, and he never worked a Toronto main event.

Regarding the AWA-WWA world heavyweight title unification match on February 26, 1966, in Chicago, where Vachon beat Bruiser via count out, the actual story is that Vachon retained the AWA title while in Chicago, they ruled the WWA title as being held up after that match. A rematch for both titles was held on March 26, 1966, which Vachon won via DQ. Since the title had been held up, the WWA title went to Vachon

on that show, at least as it pertained to Chicago, even though it was a DQ finish.

Since the issue came out, several historians had gone through old programs and wanted the correct date out on the actual title change, which was only recognized in Chicago. For the next several months on television and in the Chicago program, Vachon was called the AWA and WWA world champion, until eventually the WWA title was forgotten about. Bruiser was still calling himself WWA champion on the WWA shows in Indiana.

Regarding the AWA tag team title changes in 1971 with the Von Steigers, that was Mad Dog's idea. He didn't telling anyone in the AWA about it before hand, or even afterwards. Verne Gagne found out, and was furious. The match where Mad Dog & Butcher Vachon lost the AWA tag titles to Kurt & Karl Von Steiger definitely happened on February 23, 1971, in Portland, right before the Vachons went to Hawaii and Japan. The Vachons were not scheduled back in the AWA territory for a few weeks and would have them back on the return, but they did have the title defense the next night in Honolulu against Gagne & Billy Robinson and two title matches in Japan scheduled.

But the date of the return is in question. The title change was because Don Owen was building a major show on March 16, 1971, in Portland, where he'd have both the NWA world title at stake with Dory Funk Jr. vs. Lonnie Mayne, and the AWA tag titles with the Von Steigers defending against the Vachons. The stipulation of that match is that the titles could change via DQ. However, I've gotten contradictory information that lists the Vachons winning via DQ (which is what the local newspaper reported, but newspaper reports weren't always 100% accurate) and the Von Steigers winning that match via DQ. The few historians with records of the Von Steigers title changes list the Vachons winning them back, in a title could change hands via DQ match, on March 18, 1971, in Salem, OR, which was their last night in the territory before returning to the AWA.

RAY STEVENS

Stevens left San Francisco as a regular in 1971 to join the more-lucrative AWA, run by Verne Gagne. While Shire's circuit had several more strong years, mainly built around Patterson, it never came close to the levels it had achieved with Stevens. After Patterson also left for greener pastures in 1977, business fell off and Shire was forced to close it down as a territory in 1979 but continued to run the Cow Palace until early 1981 when Shire gave up the ghost in the wake of competition from Gagne and local football hero Leo Nomellini, who had both Patterson and Stevens in their camp.

"He was always a little boy who never grew up," recalled Harris. "He never paid taxes for years. For years Verne Gagne had wanted him but he didn't want to go. Gagne offered him a big amount of money if he'd come work there and he'd take care of all his income tax problems and the offer was too good to turn down."

All in all, Stevens wrestled for 42 years, most of it as a headliner, with his final match just a few years ago. He was probably the only headliner whose career started when wrestling was on network television in the early 50s, and continued through it getting back on 33 years later. His career on top started with Gorgeous George, through numerous eras and icons worldwide, through Archie Moore in Atlanta, the Bruiser in Indianapolis, Gene Kiniski in Ohio, Curtis Iaukea in Hawaii, Lewin in Australia, everyone from Bruno on down in California, to Gagne and Billy Robinson in the Midwest, all the way to challenging Ric Flair at the Charlotte Coliseum for the NWA title, feuding with Snuka and Bob Backlund in Madison Square Garden, appearing as a dual headliner with Hulk Hogan in the AWA, and perhaps his last main events in a major territory were in the AWA with Bockwinkel challenging the Road Warriors in 1985 for the AWA tag team titles. He had ceased to be a full-time main event performer in the big money territories shortly after the Snuka run ended. A combination of age, injuries and conditioning had taken its toll by then, not to mention the oncoming era where steroids and monstrous size ruled the roost and

the older and smaller performers and those without physiques, even with legendary names and resumes, appeared out of place.

In between there were main events throughout the world, with Stevens spending most of the 70s based out of the AWA in Minneapolis. It was in the AWA that he was given the nickname of "The Crippler," (the person Paul Heyman patterned his idea for Chris Benoit around) largely based on an angle where he used his bombs away on Dr. X (Dick Beyer) to supposedly broke his leg (allowing him to leave on an extended Japan tour). Although maintaining his reputation as a top worker in the AWA, most remember Stevens, who would be about the opposite of a conditioning freak, wasn't the same performer after returning from the 1969 broken leg. Although he maintained a reputation for being able to carry a punching bag to a quality match and being among the premier performers in the business, the Ray Stevens that fans in Northern California raved about had lost a step by the time he went to the larger AWA and WWWF territories in the 70s.

The AWA was largely a tag team territory in the early part of the decade since Gagne, who held its world title, was in his late 40s and only wrestled a few shots per month. So the territory was carried by its tag team champions, Stevens, the hard-ass street tough who would use his Bombs Away, an illegal maneuver under AWA rules, behind the refs back to draw heat and score illegal wins; and Bockwinkel, the college educated thinking pretty boy type. The two were a contrast both in the ring and on interviews, with Bockwinkel using his erudite million dollar words, and Stevens immediately contrasting it with phrases like, when talking about frequent rival Robinson, "There are only two good things that ever came out of England and Elizabeth Taylor's got both of them." While still holding the AWA tag team title, Stevens ventured into the WWWF, at the time considered a big man's only territory when it came to heels, for title shots against then-champion Pedro Morales including a couple of Madison Square Garden sellouts. By he and Bockwinkel's third title reign, the two had added manager Bobby Heenan to the team, which was generally considered the greatest tag team in the world during the decade of the 70s. After Bockwinkel captured the world title, Stevens made his babyface turn and was a frequent challenger.

"God love him. He was still smoking and drinking until the day he went," said Bockwinkel, after learning of his death. "He loved toys. He always had to have the fastest snowmobile, fastest boat, fastest car. He was always upbeat. He was never jealous. If Ray Stevens said a bad word about someone, they obviously deserved it. He was as charitable in the ring as you can get and I learned so much from him."

All his excesses began to catch up with him as he underwent quadruple-bypass surgery at Stanford University after suffering a heart attack while living in Minnesota in early 1995. Having spent money as fast as he earned it for most of his wrestling career, he returned to California, and moved back in with first wife. He went right back to his old lifestyle without missing a beat. To the end he was the source of amazement among his contemporaries who joked when seeing him about how he steadfastly ignored his doctor's advice about toning down his drinking and smoking and if anything, stepped it up a notch. But one thing had changed. Stevens didn't like to attend thing like reunions of old wrestlers, because it cut into his valuable drinking time, and he'd already missed enough of that in his years working last on the card. But over the past year he changed and attended as many of them as he could, not just the Cauliflower Alley Club and a Northern California wrestlers reunion, but also ones in Washington and Las Vegas and even in Pensacola, in a territory he may have never even worked, apparently to get together with Don Kalt (Don Fargo), who was one of his earliest tag team partners in the early 50s. Apparently even God can't look after those who don't look out for themselves forever. And after the heart attack, maybe even Ray Stevens himself began to recognize it. But he was still determined to be Ray Stevens to the end.

RAY STEVENS CAREER TITLE HISTORY

AWA World tag team: w/Nick Bockwinkel def. Red Bastien & The Crusher January 20, 1972 in Denver; lost to Verne Gagne & Billy Robinson December 30, 1972 in Minneapolis; def. Gagne & Robinson January 6, 1973 in St. Paul; lost to Crusher & Robinson July 21, 1974

in Green Bay; def. Crusher & Robinson October 24, 1974 in Winnipeg; lost to Dick the Bruiser & Crusher August 16, 1975 in Chicago; w/Patterson awarded titles when Jim Brunzell was injured in softball game September 1978; lost to Gagne & Mad Dog Vachon June 6, 1979 in Winnipeg

WALLY KARBO APRIL 5, 1993

One of the original founding fathers of both the National Wrestling Alliance and the American Wrestling Association, Wally Karbo, passed away Thursday afternoon. He was having lunch with a friend in Bloomington, MN when he suffered a heart attack, and was pronounced dead on arrival at Fairview Southdale Hospital in Edina. Newspapers listed Karbo as 77 although friends said they believed his real age to be 79. Karbo was a well-known figure over the past two decades in many cities where the AWA promoted, known more for his often-imitated stuttering voice and mannerisms when announcing he was levying the biggest fines and suspensions after a notorious angle was shot in the TV studio at the AWA tapings. He was particularly well-known in Minneapolis and Winnipeg as the long-time person known as the promoter in both cities.

Karbo, who lived his entire life in the Twin Cities area, was offered a basketball scholarship to Notre Dame in the early 30s, wound up as a boxer for a short spell for boxing/wrestling promoter Pinky George of Des Moines. The connection brought him to Tony Stecher, the boxing/wrestling czar of the Twin Cities and he worked as an office boy and referee for many years, starting around 1936. Karbo carried finishes and helped book out-of-town shows for Stecher in the Midwest and became more powerful within the office. By the 1940s, Karbo in many ways was running the wrestling end of Stecher's operations. In those days, the Minneapolis office would traditionally shut down the wrestling every, and Karbo would spend the summers in Toronto helping the late Frank Tunney in the office.

Although Karbo is not listed among the six promoters who got together and formed the National Wrestling Alliance at a 1948 meeting, his was actually in attendance at the meeting as Stecher representative along with Sam Muchnick of St. Louis (the lone founder still alive), George, Frankie Talaber, Al Haft and Orville Brown. When Stecher died in 1954, Karbo and brother Dennis Stecher became co-owners of the Minneapolis Boxing and Wrestling Club, which was the forerunner of the AWA, and worked with Fred Kohler as a talent supplier for his nationally televised broadcasts from Chicago on the old Dumont Network. Karbo was instrumental in several top football players from the University of Minnesota getting into pro wrestling, the most notable of whom was Verne Gagne. Others included Butch Levy, Cliff Gustafson, Bronko Nagurski, Leo Nomellini and his long-time promotional assistant Bill Kuusisto.

Several years later, Karbo and Gagne together bought out Dennis Stecher's piece of the office, and created the American Wrestling Association as a promotional vehicle for Gagne to claim the world heavyweight title. Karbo and Gagne worked together for the next 26 years, climaxing in the early 80s with Hulk Hogan when the company had its most profitable run ever, including consistent monthly sellouts at the 18,000 seat St. Paul Civic Center. After Hogan left and the WWF started expanding, which included raiding much of Gagne's office, Karbo and Verne had their bitter falling out in 1985. Many say spelled that spelled the beginning of the end of the AWA because Karbo got along well with most of the wrestlers while Gagne didn't, and the AWA started losing its wrestlers at a rapid pace from that point forward. He worked for a brief time as the WWF promoter in Winnipeg, but eventually signed a non-compete pact with Gagne as part of the settlement when Gagne bought out Karbo's share in the company. In recent years, Karbo had worked with the LPWA.

Karbo was fondly remembered by most wrestlers in the Twin Cities area, and was particularly well-known as well-imitated for his distinct voice. In the mid-80s, after an arrest for being a "fence," (selling off stolen goods) Karbo was regularly heckled at the matches. As a television personality, Karbo came off as a slow thinking man, although

those in wrestling, including the key promoters of the 70s, always considered that as a front because Karbo was well respected for his promotion's success. He was scheduled to be honored for his 50 plus years in wrestling on 4/17 at an independent show in Minneapolis promoted by Dennis Coraluzzo, his long-time friend Ed Sharkey (Pro Wrestling America promoter) and Sean Waltman (Lightning Kid). Sharkey talked of doing a annual show in Karbo's name, but was afraid because of how the Von Erichs used deaths to sell tickets that doing a show honoring someone may be taken the wrong way within the wrestling world. Karbo's funeral took place on 3/29 with Nick Bockwinkel delivering the eulogy.

DENNIS HILGART

May 16, 2016

Dennis Hilgart, best known as the promoter for the AWA during its glory years in cities like Milwaukee and Green Bay, passed away on 5/3 at the age of 77. Hilgart was an Observer reader probably from near the inception of this publication and was considered one of the best local promoters in the country. In particular, from 1969 to 1975, Milwaukee was one of the hottest wrestling cities in the country, legitimately selling out almost every month with The Crusher as its big attraction when the cultural thing on Sundays was to go to church and rush home to watch Crusher on television. Milwaukee was on fire again in the 1981-84 period, in particular when Hulk Hogan headlined. Hilgart later left the AWA and went to work for the WWE as the local promoter in the market.

In the 80s, Hilgart expanded his work to running shows in Las Vegas and San Francisco/Oakland (Leo Nomellini was always billed as the promoter because he was a local sports hero, but Hilgart did the work of the promoter—whenever I'd talk to people it was Hilgart as promoter but getting no credit and when asked about Leo, it was "he brings the beer"). Nicknamed "Hildegarte," he had a role as one of the promoters in Verne Gagne's 1974 movie "The Wrestler." Hilgart also promoted country music acts and worked in real estate. Gary Juster, who got his start in the business from Gagne, was sent to Milwaukee by Gagne to learn promoting from Hilgart. It's an old story but Hilgart always told me his big regret was when things were really hot and Crusher was on fire (Hilgart and Crusher were good friends and traveling partners, they'd take Crusher's van, Crusher's son Larry, who was a referee, would drive and they'd be watching the Packers games on Sundays long before most had TV set ups in their vans).

Hilgart wanted to book Milwaukee County Stadium for Gagne vs. Crusher in a face vs. face match, and promised Gagne that he would break the all-time attendance record (at the time the record, whether true or not, was recognized as 38,622 for a 1961 match in Chicago with Buddy Rogers vs. Pat O'Connor). But he felt for the good of the city, since Crusher was the big draw, that Crusher should win the title, hold it for a short period of time and then either lose to a heel in a different city, who could then lose it to Gagne, or even lose directly to Gagne in a different city. He couldn't convince Gagne to drop the title to another babyface and they never did the show.